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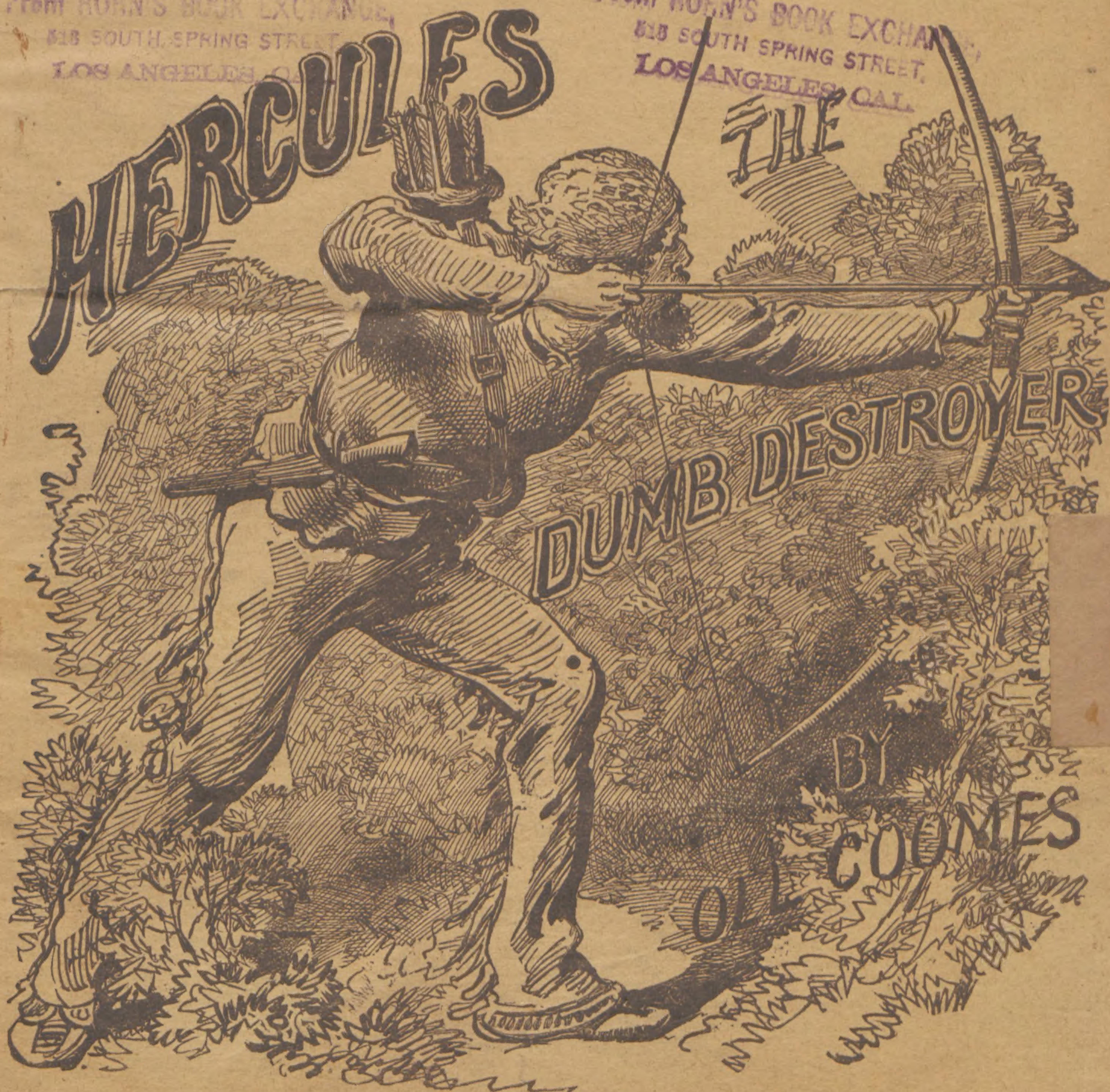
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MERCULES

DUMB DESTROYER

BY
COOPERS
OLD



An ARROW SPED FROM THE GREAT BOW OF DUMB HERCULES, AND TRUE TO ITS AIM, IT WENT HOME IN THE BREAST OF A SAVAGE.

Hercules, the Dumb Destroyer.

Hercules, The Dumb Destroyer; OR, DICK, THE BOY RANGER.

A Romance of the Niobrara.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "WHIP KING JOE," "LITTLE FOXFIRE,"
"VAGABOND JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CLOUDS.

It was a summer night on the great plains of Dakota.

The Belle Fourche river, bursting from the shadows of the Black Hills, glided like a glittering serpent across the broad expanse—ever and anon darting between great bluffs or sweeping along within the shadow of *mottes* and chaparral.

The big round moon was in the zenith casting a weird and dreamy light over all.

A soft wind blew from the west, laden with the aromatic breath of the mountains.

Within a large *motte* of scrubby timber, not over five leagues from where the Belle Fourche glided into the Cheyenne a deep and profound silence reigned, notwithstanding fifty or more savage warriors were halted therein for the night.

Not the sound of a voice, the whirr of a wing, nor the chirp of an insect broke the strange silence. Even inanimate nature was voiceless. The rippling river, the rustling grass, the murmuring, fluttering leaves had become silent as if in awe of the dark and mysterious cloud that had suddenly appeared from out the west, drifting athwart the starry sky.

Scores of savage eyes, peering from the deep shadows of the *mottes*, are fixed upon the mysterious cloud—the eyes of savage warriors, who were going forth to battle—to murder, to scalp, burn and despoil—are riveted upon the object in the heavens as though held there by a horrible, irresistible fascination. The forms of the red-skins are as motionless as the shadows around them. They seem transfixed with superstitious terror. Their hideously-painted faces become contorted with inward fear, as they watch the drifting cloud, unlike any they had ever seen before.

As the object comes nearer it begins to assume a more tangible form. To the savages it looks like an inverted *tipi* or lodge, to which hangs another object which in savage fancy becomes an aerial canoe. And in this strange bark they finally detect the presence of human forms, which discovery causes them to start slightly and draw back a pace into the deeper shadows.

Strange and mysterious indeed is that object to the Sioux warrior. To him the work of the Great Spirit's hand is visible, and they stand in terrible awe of his wrath. A cloud it seemed rising over the war-path they had taken but a few days before, determined to wreak a bloody vengeance on the white invaders of their hunting-grounds. They are too terrified to flee. They are transfixed, and like statues of stone stand half-crouching, their eyes following the aerial mystery.

The object is now almost above them. They can plainly distinguish two forms in the canoe moving, bowing, posturing. Ay! and they can even hear voices—strange and weird-like voices, such as we oft-n imagine we hear coming from out the realms of Nowhere. And suddenly a shout, clear and distinct, peals out, and at the same instant one of the occupants of the mysterious craft is seen to leap out into space, and with great, black, bat-like wings spreading out around him, descend rapidly to the earth.

A low murmur of excitement passes quickly along the line of startled, horrified Sioux; but still held immovable by terror's fascination, they watch the sky-traveler descent to earth, and see the great, dark craft from which he had leaped rise higher into the heavens and drift away toward the east.

Not far from the grove on the open plain—within twenty paces of the motionless savages, the mysterious being touches the earth, his wings collapse, and then only the form of a man stands revealed in the moonlight—the man with a lithe, slender form, long hair and whiskers that shone white as silver in the moonbeams, and gave him a strange, venerable and Druidical appearance. Unlike a celestial being, however, he is dressed in a suit of buckskin, while on his head is a glossy leather cap.

For a moment the stranger gazes away heavenward after the receding craft from which he had descended, then glances around him, bends his head and listens, but only for a moment.

Lifting his head he looks toward the *mottes* from whence comes a sound like that made by animals munching grass.

Then carefully folding together that which had served him as wings in his descent to the earth, he placed it under his arm, took up another bundle and advanced with noiseless step toward the grove.

The spell that bound the savages was now broken. The low murmur of voices, the soft movement of feet and rattling of leaves broke the profound silence of the *mottes*. A savage chief, with hands uplifted in token of friendship, stepped out of the shadows and stopped before the aerial visitor.

The latter at sight of him started back in evident surprise, but he quickly recovered his presence of mind, and, in a tone calculated to convince the sav-

age that his presence there was known before he appeared, he said:

"Ay! my red brother is here. The Great Spirit told me he would be. You are a chief of the Sioux?"

"I am Standing Bear, the war-chief of Sitting Bull," replied the Indian; "my warriors are in the darkness of the grove, there. They stand in awe of him who rides on the clouds."

"Let them fear me not," responded the aerial visitor, in a low and solemn voice. "I come with a message from the Great Spirit. I ride in the clouds—the clouds are my wings. But I will not go back to the sky until the moon goes down and the sun comes out. But why is Standing Bear in war-paint? Has he dug up the hatchet?"

"The pale-face hunter and settler has provoked us to war. They are crowding us back into the hills and slaying our game. Our squaws and papoosees are crying for food. The Sioux must defend his hunting-ground or die of hunger."

While the two were thus conversing the warriors, recovering somewhat from their superstitious fears, came out of the shadows with soft footsteps, advanced as though treading on sacred ground, and gathered around their chief and the mysterious visitor—gazing upon the latter in silent and solemn awe.

The conversation was continued. The sky-traveler spoke in that peculiar epigrammatic Indian eloquence so characteristic of the savage orator. He quickly ingratiated himself into the confidence of the chief and his warriors, and was invited into the grove to share their bivouac with them.

A fire was lighted and within its glow the chief and the celestial visitor sat down and smoked the pipe of peace, while the warriors looked on in silence.

Thus working upon their savage ignorance and credulity through the mystery surrounding his coming from the sky, the stranger became an honored guest in the red-skin camp.

A tent was constructed for his comfort, of poles and blankets, and after their camp-fire had burned out and the eyes of the stranger grew heavy with drowsiness, Standing Bear conducted him to the tent and bade him good-night.

Entering the lodge the stranger threw himself on the couch of blankets, and in the silent shadows of the place rolled and tossed in a fit of silent laughter. After he had thus relieved himself he became absorbed in serious mental reflections, from which he was finally aroused by the shouting of voices and the trampling of hooved feet.

Applying his ear to an opening in the lodge he discovered that a number of horsemen had entered the grove and joined the red-skins.

By their voices he knew they were white men, and by the manner in which they were received, he knew they were allies of the savages.

"By the eternal stars!" mused the sky-traveler, "it's the outlaw, Black Diablo, and his band, or Satan's a saint!"

And in this he was right. It was that notorious outlaw, robber and road-agent, Black Diablo, and his followers.

The freebooters dismounted, and then ordering their horses staked out to grass with saddles and bridles left upon them, Black Diablo and Standing Bear entered into conversation.

"Well, Standing Bear," said the outlaw, "I did not get here soon as I promised you I would, but I guess I'm here in time for work. Have you sighted any desirable scalps yet?"

"No; we have been waiting for our white brother."

"Your patience shall be rewarded, chief. My spy informs me that the train coming is rich in pretty squaws, fine horses and cattle, good guns and abundance of ammunition, tobacco and whisky. Oh! we'll have a royal time, chief."

But instead of feeling elated over these prospective prizes the chief was demure and silent.

Black Diablo noticed this.

"Chief, you seem dispirited; what is the matter?"

"A cloud passed over the sky to-night bearing a messenger from the Great Spirit," replied the Sioux.

Black Diablo broke into a low, derisive laugh.

"We saw that cloud, too, Standing Bear, as we rode over the plain. It was a balloon—nothing more—a contrivance of the pale-face by which he can go sailin' 'round in the heavens, as a boat sails on the water."

The chief drew closer to the dark-visaged outlaw and listened intently to his words.

"There were two men in that balloon's basket," he went on, "when it passed over us. We sent a few shots at them, but got no game."

"Why did the white chief try to slay the sky-travelers?" asked the puzzled, confused Standing Bear.

"Because they are our enemies," continued Black Diablo. "It is not the first time I have seen that balloon ramblin' 'round the heavens. It's simply a new and safe way a certain man—a white scout—has o' reconnciterin' the hills and prairies. I have seen it a dozen times when on the plains of Texas, and I never saw it once but what trouble followed in the shape of a notorious scout and border detective called Skylark Sam. He usually turns up where least expected. He has been seen to drop from the balloon into the heart of the mountains by means of a contrivance called a *parachute*—a big, umbrella-like thing that spreads out over his head like great wings, and fillin' with air descends slowly."

"Does my white brother speak the truth?" demanded the chief, starting up in evident excitement.

"Did I ever deceive you, Standing Bear?"

"No; the white chief's tongue has always been straight."

"Then why did you ask me the question? Did you doubt me?"

"One of the men from the great air-boat is now in the camp of Standing Bear."

"The fiends you say!" exclaimed the Spaniard, grasping his revolver and springing to his feet.

"The Sioux," continued the chief, "saw the air-boat coming, and when one of the men descended to the earth near us, we invited him to our camp. We believed he was a messenger from the Great Spirit."

"A messenger from the devil!" retorted Black Diablo; "where is he now?"

"Yonder," and the chief pointed in the direction of the lodge that was hidden in the darkness.

"I'll bet forty scalps it's my evil genius, Old Skylark Sam. If it is, I—"

The crack of a pistol, accompanied with a piercing yell of agony, cut short his speech.

In an instant every savage and outlaw was upon his feet.

Then a rush was made in the direction whence the sounds came.

Out into the moonlight they hurry—out upon the prairie where an outlaw lies beaten the earth in the throes of death.

A moment later a wild, demoniac yell pierces the sky, for all see a form vault into the saddle still on the back of Black Diablo's horse and dash furiously away over the plain.

Back to the lodge of the sky-traveler rush Standing Bear and Black Diablo, but only to find the place deserted!

"Curambo! It is as I expected!" howled the outlaw, with a furious oath, his face growing black with impotent fury: "you have been deceived—gloriously duped, Standing Bear, by that infamous old fiend—Skylark Sam, the Border Detective!"

CHAPTER II.

DUMB HERCULES.

A dense fog hung over the plains of Dakota, obscuring the range of vision and almost blotting out the sun; yet, despite this unnatural gloom, the immigrant train of Colonel Gershon Owens, led by the careful and cautious guide, Niobrara Jack, moved slowly westward along the Cheyenne river.

The train was composed of some twenty odd heavy and light vehicles drawn by horses and mules well equipped. The heavy wagons were loaded with farm implements and household goods, while in the lighter vehicles rode the women and children.

One wagon alone drawn by four horses carried a load that might have aroused the wonder and curiosity of a casual observer. It had no tilted cover—it was not bulky. It was covered up with canvas and tent-poles, yet seemed the heaviest load of all.

All told, there were forty souls in the party—thirty of whom were men in the very prime of vigor and manhood.

A herd of fine cattle were driven in the rear of the train by mounted men and boys.

The party was headed for the Niobrara country; having crossed the Missouri at Fort Sully.

Colonel Owens had conceived the idea of organizing a colony in the fertile valley of the Niobrara. He was a man who loved the wild prairies, and being of an adventuresome turn of mind, and withal, a kind-hearted and philanthropic man, had organized a party from among his acquaintances, aiding, with his ample means, many of them in procuring an outfit.

With no one but himself and daughter, Zulima—a fair and lovely girl of seventeen—possessed of a liberal fortune, he might have lived in ease and comfort; but he was ambitious and enterprising, as well as adventuresome, and so, while gratifying his love of the prairie, he resolved to build up around him a society whose founders were of his own selecting.

The colonel was not ignorant of the fact that dangers were likely to be encountered—that hardships and privations were before them. He knew that life and property would be in constant danger from the outlaw and red-skin so long as the red-tape policy of the military prevailed; but, having had some experience in the Indian wars in Minnesota, the colonel felt that with his force well-armed and equipped, he would be able to defend himself against the outlaws and predatory bands of savages, at least.

Since crossing the river they had frequently heard that dangers were brewing among the Black Hills Indians; but Old Niobrara Jack, the guide, regarded the reports as the usual stories perpetrated on the immigrant by both hunter and ranchman with the selfish motive of keeping settlers off the hunting-grounds and pasture range.

But on the day in question, when the fog hung low and dense over the plain, while Colonel Owens and Old Jack were riding along some distance in advance of the train, they came suddenly upon the lifeless body of an Indian lying across the trail they were following.

Old Jack quickly dismounted and examined the body. It was still warm. A huge, red-shafted arrow was buried half its length in the warrior's naked breast.

"By the roarin' ravens, colonel!" exclaimed the old guide, "this must be the work of Dumb Hercules."

"Dumb Hercules? Who's Dumb Hercules?" demanded the colonel.

"There, now you've got me, colonel," declared the guide, a matter-of-fact old fellow who, unlike the average prairie scout, did not claim a knowledge of everything; I've hearn o' him these two years and more, but I never clapped an optic onto him. Sol Bundy said he met him once, and that he war a dreadful giant—a madman that went cavortin' up

and down the Cheyennes, from mountains to forks with no weapons but a huge bow and arrows big as Inglis lances—slayin' a id slaughterin' reds and outlaws indiscriminately."

"But, why is he called Dumb Hercules?"

"Cause they say he is dumb—can't speak a word, and I reckon that's why he uses the bow and arrow—all silent—Silent Death—Silent Slayer—Dumb Avenger. But, colonel, do ye see this Inglis's in war-paint?—that means danger in the air! I tell you, boss, thar's got to be some scountin' done, or we may find ourselves in a trap."

"To keep down excitement, Jack," said the colonel, "suppose you conceal that body before the train comes up. The sight of it will cause a general stampede."

Old Jack dragged the body off to one side and concealed it in a clump of tall grass.

Then, mounting his horse the two rode slowly on.

"It now wants but an hour of noon," said Owens, consulting his watch; "we'd better go into camp soon, so that you can reconnoiter the surrounding plain."

"Yes, colonel, for I tell you thar's sulphur in this fog," affirmed the guide, with a look of uneasiness upon his bearded face.

"Strange, passing strange, indeed, that the military can't keep the infernal Ingins in their place, Jack," declared the colonel.

"Too much red-tape, colonel," replied the guide; "I tell you that a hundred old hunters and frontiersmen turned loose on the red-skins and outlaws, with all the elbow room they wanted, and they'd do more to'ards angelizing the varmints'n al the sojers in the kentry. But say, colonel over here on our right is a nice little grove on the river-bank that'd be a boss campin' place for wood and water. S'pose we turn—"

His words were here cut short by the "whiz" of something through the air above their heads.

Quickly the two men drew rein. Their horses pricked up their ears and sniffed the air uneasily.

"Jack, what was it, a bird?" asked the colonel, with a look of uneasiness and perplexity.

"Sounded like an arrow, colonel," returned the guide.

"Good God! can it be that your mysterious Dumb Hercules is trying to slay us? Is he a demon?—no respecter of persons?"

Old Jack made no answer to the colonel's queries, but pointing ahead of them a few paces, said:

"Look thar, colonel! See that arrow!"

The colonel answered in the affirmative.

"It just dropped from the air."

Dismounting the guide advanced and drew the arrow from the ground and examined it.

"By my soul!" exclaimed Colonel Owens, "it is a big affair, sure, and must have taken the strength of a Samson to have sent it from the bow. From what direction did it come, Jack?"

"I don't know," answered the astonished guide, peering around him into the dismal fog; "it stood straight up in the ground as if it dropped straight down."

"Hello!" suddenly called out Owens, as he continued to examine the arrow; "here is something Jack, intended to throw some light on the situation."

One side of the arrow had been flattened, and upon the smooth white surface were written in pencil these words:

"Go no further at your peril—camp and fortify—Indian ambush ahead—I am watching a scout—can't leave position.
DUMB HERCULES."

As he read these words aloud to Old Jack the colonel's hand began to tremble and his face grew pale.

"My God! Can this be true?"

"Reckon it is, colonel—leastwise we can't disregard it. I'll run over to the grove there and look through it, and you ride back and hurry up the train, but don't tell 'em thar's danger ahead or there'll be a panic."

Owens whirled his horse and galloped back toward the train, while Jack rode cautiously into the grove and selected a location for a camp and defense.

In a few minutes the colonel came riding up to the grove at a furious speed, his face flushed with excitement.

"My God, Jack!" he exclaimed. "the coach with Zulima and Kitty Lane is not with the train, and Frank Mayne says they have not been up with the train since we broke camp this morning. Can it be possible they have got lost in this fog?"

"Lots o' danger, colonel, if the driver should lose sight o' the train and then pay no attention to the trail."

"Then I'm afraid they're in trou' le, Jack: I have told Black Bob, the driver, repeatedly, about fooling off from the train to gratify some girlish whim of Zulima and Kitty."

"Well, if they don't come in soon, colonel, I'll run down the trail and look for them," announced Old Jack.

The train coming up the wagons were quickly put into position, the horses unharnessed, and, with the cattle, corralled in a sharp bend in the river just below the grove.

Then the entire force of men were set to work digging rifle-pits, and making all necessary arrangements for a stubborn defense of their position should they be attacked.

"Now, colonel," said Old Jack, when he had seen the work well under way, "as the coach hasn't come up with the gals, I'll run back and look for them. Keep the boys at work, and a sharp lookout around you, and if the red-skins attack you remember it's victory or sure death."

"May God speed you, Jack!" exclaimed the colonel, as the kind-hearted old guide vaulted into his saddle and galloped away.

The men worked like beavers, for Owens had communicated the secret of the impending dangers. All, however, were sorely distressed over the absence of Zulima and Kitty. The mother of the latter paced the grove, wringing her hands in agonizing grief, and watching through her tears for the coming of her child.

An hour went by and neither Old Jack nor the coach came in.

The rifle-pits were completed and rifles and revolvers were carefully loaded and placed ready for instant use.

Another hour; still no tidings from the absent ones.

"Oh, heavens!" moaned the distracted colonel; "this cruel fog I fear will be the death of my child!"

As if to mock his misery, he was answered from out on the plain by the sharp barking of a coyote.

"Colonel," said Tom Woolson, the wagon-master, a blunt-spoken young man of five-and-twenty, who had spent many years as a freighter across the Western plains, "that yawn never come from the throat of a wolf. I'll bet my suspenders it's a red-skin's signal, and if so we can look out for fun!"

"Oh, if Old Jack were here!" spoke the colonel, as he and Tom walked down to the river-bank and halted by the side of a dense thicket.

"Yes, we'd all feel safer," replied Woolson; "but I'll declare, colonel, I believe the fog's raisin'—goin' to leave."

"It is growing lighter, I believe, Tom. If it's only clear off, the advantage would be in our favor, and perhaps expose the red-skins to view if there are any in the neighborhood; and I have no reason to doubt the warning of Dumb Hercules, as mysteriously as it came to us—Ah, look yonder, Tom! do you see that deer out there?"

Looking in the direction indicated, Tom saw the head and antlers of a deer above a clump of sagebrush not over sixty yards away. It seemed to be looking directly toward the grove as if it scented danger in the air.

"Yes, that's a deer's head, sure, colonel," replied the wagon-master, "and yet it may be the cunnin' device—"

The young man's words were here cut short by the loud "thrum" of a bowstring, and the whiz of an arrow through the air over their heads. The sounds came from the thicket at their backs, but before they could turn a yell of frightful agony came from out on the prairie.

To the surprise and astonishment of the immigrants they saw the supposed deer leap into the air, then dart out from its covert and, staggering, fall to the earth.

"By heavens! it was an Ingin in disguise!" exclaimed the colonel.

While this was true, it was also true that the red-skin had been slain by the hand of Dumb Hercules, the Silent Shot! And, what was more, the mysterious man stood in the thicket behind them—with in ten feet of them!

With a kind of a shudder—with all the stories Old Jack had told him of the bloody deeds of the Dumb Destroyer trooping up in his mind, the colonel turned to the thicket. As he did so, the bushes were parted and Dumb Hercules stepped out and confronted him.

Involuntarily the colonel shrunk back, while bluff Tom Woolson, arching his eyebrows in a look of surprise, exclaimed:

"Great jumpin' giants! what a rip-snorter!"

The faintest perceptible smile passed over the giant's face as he recognized the two men with a bow of the head. In stature he was a giant indeed, standing fully six feet three in his moccasins. He was broad-shouldered, deep-chested and squarely built. A large and well-shaped head sat erect upon a strong, muscular neck, and was covered with a cap made of the feathered skin of a loon. His face, remarkable in its intelligence, was covered with a long brown beard. His eyes were of a dark-blue color, and instead of wearing that wild, listless and expressionless stare so peculiar to the deaf and dumb, they were the most remarkable of the man's features—being clear and keen as a hawk's, with a light shining from their mysterious depths possessing that same strange fascination which one experiences in looking from a dizzy height into an unfathomable abyss below. He was dressed in a suit of buckskin that showed his powerful and well-made form to good advantage. He was virtually a man in mid-life, not being over forty.

In his hand he carried a long and powerful bow that must have required prodigious strength to bend. At his back was a huge quiver well filled with arrows, whose feathered shafts projected above his shoulder.

Advancing, Colonel Owens put out his hand and addressed the giant. The latter accepted the proffered hand, but at the same time he touched his lips and shook his head.

"Ah! I forgot," said Owens, "that he is deaf and dumb. Poor fellow! What a pity that such a—"

"Good King David! look there, colonel!" suddenly interrupted Tom Woolson, pointing across the plain.

Like a mighty curtain swept aside by some unseen hand the fog lifted, and the sun falling to earth revealed a frightful terrible spectacle. It was three-score mounted savages coming at a sweeping, break-neck gallop down toward the grove. But more like demons born of the departing gloom they appeared than human beings. The heads of the band were surmounted by buffalo skulls, deer-heads and antlers, and every conceivable device of

savage ingenuity calculated to give them the appearance of grotesque devils, and thereby strike terror to the hearts of the whites; and as the savages uttered no sound, they appeared like phantom demons indeed, gliding noiselessly along the plain. It was quite evident that they had intended to steal a march upon the colonists under cover of the fog, and would have succeeded but for the timely lifting of the dismal mist.

"To arms, men!" shouted Colonel Owens—"to arms, and remember Old Jack's admonition: victory or death!"

An arrow sped from the great bow of Dumb Hercules, and true to its aim, it went home in the breast of a savage, who gave utterance to a horrible howl.

This was followed by a wild, demoniac yell—

"As if all the fiends from heaven that fell Had pealed the banner-cry of hell!"

Then the rifles of the emigrants began to crack along the line of defense, and soon these reports became blended in one steady roar, and amid the awful din of the battle there was suddenly mingled a thunderous crash that seemed to rend the very heavens and shake the earth to its foundation.

CHAPTER III. A FEARFUL RACE.

"Boom-m-m-m!"

It was the deep and sullen roar of a cannon that rolled in prolonged echoes through the valley of the Cheyenne, starting from their noontide repose in the chaparral. Dare Devil Dick and his little band of prairie-rangers.

Springing to their feet with flashing eyes, and with ears on the alert, the rangers mechanically grasp their pistol-butts as they exchange silent and significant looks.

There were just twenty of the noted band. The leader, Dare Devil Dick, was a young man—a mere boy of twenty years. He was of medium height with a well-developed form; square shouldered and deep-chested, and with easy and graceful movements—the eyes of the hawk, and face and features indicative of a rollicking, dashing spirit. His soft, brown hair, gathered back from a noble brow, hung down upon his shoulders. He was dressed in a suit of buckskin, high-topped boots and broad-brimmed hat. He was armed with a saber, a pair of revolvers, and a Winchester rifle—the latter slung at his back. On each heel was a large silver spur; around his waist was a scarlet sash.

The ages of Dare Devil Dick's men ranged from twenty to thirty years. They were all daring and dashing fellows armed and dressed as was their leader.

The name of Dare Devil Dick had recently sprung into local prominence throughout western Dakota, for he was making himself a terror to Indian and outlaw alike. It had gone abroad that he and his band were in the employ of the stage, express and western railroad companies, who, tired of the tardiness of the military in punishing the marauding red-skins and plundering outlaws, had resolved to take the matter in their hands; but be this as it may, the rangers were making for themselves a name envied by the restless soldier, and feared by the savage and outlaw.

"By the eternal stars!" exclaimed Dare Devil Dick, as the boom of the cannon again came rolling up the valley, "that was the roar of a canon, boys, surer than death!"

Turning they all hurry to the edge of the chaparral and gaze down the valley. The crash of firearms and the yells of savages came faintly to their ears, and ever and anon the thunderous voice of the canon booms out.

"Boys, it's a battle with Standing Bear's Ingins," declared the young ranger leader, "and I'm afraid my predictions have come true—that Colonel Owens's train has been attacked. I told him he had better take a more southern route, but he seemed to think the Cheyenne trail would be safe enough."

"Then you really did see the colonel?" queried Lieutenant Saul Kirby.

"Yes, I staid over night in his camp a week ago, and passed myself as a cowboy under the name of Dick Morris. I told him repeatedly that he might expect danger on this trail. I also told his daughter—"

"Ay! I see now why our captain has been so vigilant along this valley of late," broke in Kirby; "I'll venture the assertion that if the colonel's daughter is handsome, Dare Devil Dick is her victim."

The rangers all enjoyed a laugh at Dick's expense, but there seemed too much truth in Kirby's thoughtless remarks for Dick himself to fully enjoy them, and as the boom of the cannon came to his ears again, he turned and said:

"Boys, we must go to the help of those people. A desperate conflict is raging. We may be in time to prevent a horrible massacre. To horse, boys, to horse!"

In a few moments the little band were in their saddles, and with Dick at their head, went speeding away like the wind down the valley.

But, they had gone scarcely half a mile when their ears were suddenly greeted by a wild, savage yell off on the left. Drawing rein, they glanced out over the prairie, when, to their surprise and astonishment, they beheld a carriage, or coach, drawn by four horses, flying with the speed of the wind over the plain, while in swift pursuit rode nearly a score of Indians, yelling like infuriated demons.

"Boys," called out Dare Devil Dick, drawing his revolver and settling himself firmly in his saddle, "there is work for us! Intercept and destroy them howling devils, while I ride to the rescue of those in the coach. Away! Charge!"

And, like the swoop of the hurricane, the rangers

whirled their horses and sped away across the level prairie.

Mounted upon a sure-footed and swift-limbed horse of "registered" blood, Dare Devil Dick dashed straight toward the coach. Knowing the valor of his followers, he had no fears of their ability to perform the duty assigned to them, and shortly the youth found himself riding alone in pursuit of the flying coach, while back behind him soon rose the din of battle.

Rapidly the boy gained upon the coach, and as he drew near to it a white face at the window told him that it was occupied by at least one woman, and the face of that woman he quickly recognized, although it was white with terror, as the fair and lovely face of Zulima Owens, whom he had met a week or so before near Fort Sully—a face that had not been absent from his young heart since the day he had first looked upon it.

And the recognition must have been mutual, for Zulima herself recognized, in the approaching horseman, him whom she had once met—the ranchero giving his name as Dick Morris; and turning to her companion, Kitty Lane, she exclaimed:

"Oh, thank God, Kitty! yonder comes a horseman—a white man! It is the ranchero, Kitty—he who came to our camp—Dick Morris! And look! yonder go a number more horsemen to intercept the Indians! Thank God! thank God!"

"Tell Robert, Zulima! tell Robert!" exclaimed the terrified Kitty with quivering lips.

Putting her head out of the open window Zulima shouted to Black Bob, their driver:

"Hold firm, Rouert! Help is coming! help is—Oh, my God!"

As the last exclamation burst from her lips the maiden sunk back in her seat, speechless—her face white with terror.

"What now, Zulima? What is it?" gasped Kitty, grasping her friend's arm in a nervous clutch.

"Oh, Kitty, Robert is dead! his poor body hangs half out of the box! The Indians killed him when they fired at us, and the horses have been running away!"

"Oh, heavens! then we shall be dashed to pieces! Zulima, can't we leap out?"

"It would be sure death, Kitty! Our only hope lies in the help of that approaching horseman."

"Zulima!" suddenly cried Kitty, as the violent lunging of the coach burst open the door on her side, "here comes another horseman on the high; but see! he is a hideous Indian!"

True enough, a savage horseman in the war-bonnet and gaudy plumage of a chief—hideous in paint, with a jaguar-skin girded about his waist, was riding furiously toward them from the east. He was, when first discovered, about the same distance away that the ranger was; and now, more than ever, did their hopes of escape center in the boy.

Stretching out her arm in mute appeal toward the youth, Zulima's white lips muttered a fervent prayer.

CHAPTER IV.

A TRIPLE TRAGEDY.

On dashed the frantic team—the coach rocking, bounding and creaking as though every joint and rivet was ready to yield to the terrible strain upon them.

On came the fearless, desperate Boy Ranger on the left and the Liedou, demoniac savage on the right—the former clutching his trusty revolver, the latter his tomahawk.

And, as if to conceal from view a bloody tragedy, the fog that for the past hour had been slowly lifting fell suddenly like a shadow over the plain.

Aware of the presence of each other, and the object that each had in view, Dare Devil Dick and the savage rode so as to keep the coach between them. But suddenly, when within twenty feet of the vehicle, the Boy Ranger dropped back so as to bring the savage in view when he quickly raised his revolver and fired.

Under ordinary circumstances Dare Devil Dick was a wonderful shot, and as his weapon rang out he saw a grimace of pain pass over the face of the red-skin and his body relax its upright rigidness and sink slightly in the saddle.

Certain his bullet had done its work, the young ranger did not attempt a second shot, nor even give the savage a second glance, but at once dashed alongside the flying coach, tossed his revolver into the vehicle, saying, as he did so:

"Courage, ladies, courage!"

As he spoke his eyes and Zulima's eyes met, and for a brief moment remained fixed, when he threw up his hands and caught hold of the iron railing around the top of the vehicle, a feeling of renewed courage and determination thrilling his young heart while Zulima's eyes, swimming in tears, glowed with a look of admiration and hope.

Suddenly, and with the agility of a squirrel, Dare Devil Dick, clinging to the railing, rose to his knees in the saddle and with a desperate spring landed on top of the coach! His first thought was of getting hold of the lines, that were still grasped in the dead negro's hands, and getting the horses under control. But to his surprise and horror, he had scarcely landed on the vehicle's narrow deck from one side, ere the savage whom he supposed he had slain, leaped upon it like a panther from the other.

Their meeting there seemed a mutual surprise, and for a second they stood upon their knees, motionless, speechless—glaring upon each other like tigers; but it was only for a brief second they thus regarded each other when, as if thrown together by the rocking of the coach, they grappled in a deadly struggle and rolled over on their sides, and but for the iron railing around the deck—the vehicle being

a regular stage-coach and the property of Colonel Owens—they would have rolled to the earth.

Neither of the combatants had taken time to draw a weapon, and the hope of victory lay in each preventing the other from so doing.

They fought in silence—neither uttering a word. The terrified girls could not see the combatants, but they had seen both leap onto the coach and could now hear them fighting like demons possessed. Thus a new terror was added to their situation, and all other dangers were forgotten in the dread that now seemed to paralyze their very hearts. Full well they knew that upon the result of the deadly conflict overhead depended their fate; and finally, as if unable to bear the suspense longer, Zulima snatched up the revolver the young ranger had tossed at her feet, cocked it, and pointed it upward at the roof of the coach. She was no novice in the use of the weapon. This Kitty Lane knew, and quickly divining her purpose, she exclaimed:

"Do not fire, Zulima, through the top, or you may kill our young friend!"

Zulima dropped the weapon, and turning to Kitty, cried out:

"Oh, my God! Kitty, what shall we do?"

Before the other could reply the coach seemed to leave the earth, then leap forward with a thunderous lurch, throwing the maidens forward with such fearful violence as to partially stun them. But amid a confusion of fearful sounds, and a violent jerking of the coach, Zulima rose to her feet and looked out of the window. She started back with a cry of horror. She saw the coach was standing still, surrounded by water.

"My God! Kitty, we are in the river!"

Kitty rose to her feet and looked out, unable to speak or cry out.

There was a momentary silence. The sound of the conflict on the coach could no longer be heard. The combatants were not there.

Again Zulima turned to the window and looked out over the rushing waters. She saw a pair of outstretched arms rise on the surface a few rods below. She caught sight of a wild, despairing face—the face of the Boy Ranger, but the next instant it was swept from her view.

Sick at heart, Zulima sunk back on the seat. As the face of that daring young ranger went down—sunk beneath the waves, the last faint hope seemed to die within her breast.

For a moment she sat motionless; then, rallying, she again looked out. She saw they were fully twenty feet from the nearest shore. Every horse was down and so tangled in their harness that they could not rise. Two of them—the leaders—were upon their backs, and the other two on top of them, and all four, the maiden saw, were rapidly sinking in the treacherous quicksand.

The river at this point was shallow, but it was there that the dangers from the quicksands were all the greater. The maidens quickly realized their new peril, for they had often heard of the dangers of the Western rivers. They could already see that the coach itself was rapidly going down, and that the struggling of the drowning horses was gradually becoming feebler.

The maidens grew almost helpless with terror. One after another had repeated horrors crowded upon them in such rapid succession that their minds and bodies began to sink under the terrible strain.

Down, down sank the coach. The horses had ceased to struggle. The water began creeping into the box.

Rallying her courage once more, Zulima threw open the door to leap out into the stream, but she started back at sight of the swirling flood that seemed to laugh in gurgling glee around the coach.

Kitty fell back in the seat in a swoon, and at sight of her pallid face Zulima seemed driven to the verge of despair. Turning, she stretched out her arms through the open door, and lifting her face toward heaven cried:

"Father! father! Oh, my dear father! help! help!"

"Help! help!" were the words echoed back to her ears in hollow mockery.

A silence profound as death followed.

The awful drama was drawing to a close. The water was rising in the sinking coach, and the fog was descending like the shadow of death from out the heavens.

Zulima, overcome with horror at last, sunk back by Kitty's side; then, like the visions and voices of a dream, the distant shore faded from her view, and the devilish laugh and glee of the hungry water died on her ears.

CHAPTER V.

"DEAD!"

The conflict between the savages of Standing Bear and Colonel Owens's party was short, sharp and deadly. The red-skins had expected to surprise the colonists, but were themselves the surprised party in the end.

Colonel Owens had entered the Indian country well prepared for just such an emergency, in that he had with his train a six-inch brass howitzer. This weapon he had carried in concealment, so that but very few, if any, save his own party, knew of its presence in the train until it belched forth its deadly contents into the ranks of the savages.

The colonel, assisted by men he had trained to handle the gun, quickly reloaded it with grape; then again there burst forth from its muzzle a great puff of smoke and tongue of scorching flame, and the deadly missiles went tearing into the ranks of the foe, strewing the earth with men and horses. In the mean time, the men in the rifle-pits kept up a steady and deadly fire from their Winchesters,

while Dumb Hercules stood boldly out in view, sending arrow after arrow upon its mission of death.

Thus had the over-confident savages, in a few brief moments been confronted by one surprise after another in such rapid succession, that, before the battle had really begun, on their part, they found themselves defeated and flying, panic-stricken, up the valley, only too eager to get out of reach of the great gun which continued to send shot after them until they had vanished in the distance.

All of their dead and most of their wounded were left on the field. The victory had been overwhelming and bloodless, and the shouts that now pealed from the lips of the colonists pierced the very sky.

But their triumph over the Indians brought only partial relief to the mind of Colonel Owens and John and Sarah Lane. Zulima and Kitty were still absent! Old Jack had not returned from his search, and his prolonged absence filled their hearts with the gravest apprehensions.

As soon as the excitement of victory had cooled down, Colonel Owens turned and walked down to where Dumb Hercules still stood gazing out over the prairie where the dead and dying savages lay in plain view. Taking the giant's hand he shook it warmly, manifesting the greatest joy.

But not a movement of the Silent Scout's features betrayed the least emotion. He seemed as stolid as a carved image, much to the surprise of the colonel. Presently, however, he took a small, circular piece of slate from his pocket, and with a pencil wrote a few words upon it, and handed it to the colonel, who read thereon these words:

"I can hear, but cannot speak."

"What!" burst involuntarily from Owen's lips;

"you speechless, and yet not deaf?"

The man nodded his head.

"Well, I never heard of such a thing before," the colonel went on; "what caused your loss of speech? Have you always been so?"

The giant's breast heaved and his breath came short; his eyes seemed to dilate; the muscles of his face quivered and twitched. Suddenly he clutched nervously at his throat, and gasped like one suffocating; then, as the look of an enraged demon flashed over his whole face, he turned and walked out into the prairie.

Colonel Owens saw that his questions had aroused some terrible emotion in the giant's breast, and sorely regretted that he had done so.

Watching the movements of the strange man, he saw him walk out to where a dead savage lay with one of his own—the giant's—arrows in his breast. Drawing a knife, he bent over the body and quickly and dexterously tore the scalp from the head. Then he moved on from body to body repeating his ghastly work, though only upon those of the red-skins who had fallen by his hand. When no more of the dead bearing his mark could be found, he twined the bloody scalps around his belt, and turning, walked calmly back to the astounded colonel, whose heart grew sick at the sight of the reeking trophies.

The face of the giant was still flushed, and his eyes blazed with an unnatural light, but he breathed easier, and the colonel imagined he saw a strange smile move his bearded lips—a cold, bitter smile—the expression of a relentless heart.

Owens stood speechless. For once the colonel was at a loss for something to say. He did not want to offend the mysterious man who had already saved them from Indian massacre. To his relief, however, the Silent Scout wrote a few words on his slate and handed it to him. The colonel read:

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay."

Passing the slate back to the man, Owens nodded his head, in a thoughtful, serious way. To him those words spoke volumes. Finally he said:

"I presume I need ask you no questions about yourself?"

The man shook his head.

In the mean time the women and children had come up out of the rifle-pits, where they had taken refuge, and stood huddled together near the wagons discussing the absence of Zulima and Kitty, and the peril of their situation.

A little girl-baby of three years, with big, brown eyes, and sweet, innocent face, escaped from its excited mother's side and came toddling toward the colonel and the giant scout. At sight of it the latter started as though just aroused from a terrible dream, and snatching the ghastly scalps from his girdle, he threw them over the bank into the river. Then, as he continued watching the child, his whole being seemed transformed into that of another man. That fixed rigidity of features melted into a faint smile, and his blue eyes beamed with tender admiration.

The colonel saw that the presence of the child had touched a chord in his heart awakening tender memories.

At this juncture Tom Woolson, the wagon-master, came and addressed the colonel. The latter turned to answer him.

The child toddled on. Dumb Hercules's eyes remained fixed upon her. She came to within a few feet of him when she stumbled and fell to the earth. The giant quickly stepped forward and lifted her to her feet, then he raised her tenderly and held her on his arm. The baby drew back at sight of his bearded face; her lips quivered, and she seemed about to burst into tears when the eyes of the two met—the eyes of the giant and the eyes of the babe—and for several moments remained fixed upon each other. The souls of the two seemed to hold a silent communion, and the fears of the child vanishing from her little breast, her curiosity became attracted by

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the curious-looking cap on the giant's head. She reached out her chubby hand toward it, and, in doing so, touched the giant's face. That touch, soft and innocent, seemed to open a well-spring in the man's heart, for at once the tears gushed into his eyes and rolled down his bearded cheeks. At sight of his tears the child began to cry when Hercules placed her on the ground and turned and walked away a few paces, his eyes fixed upon the ground in a thoughtful mood.

Presently he came back to the colonel. His eyes were dry, and his face was wearing that inflexible expression.

Colonel Owens conversed with him about the missing girls and absent wife, but the giant could give him no consolation, and as the hours wore on the conviction that the girls were in trouble grew upon all; and yet, all had such faith in Old Jack they felt assured that when he returned he would bring the maidens with him.

Dumb Hercules stood silent, his eyes ever fixed upon the plain, listening to the travelers' discussion of their situation and the probable outcome of it. Finally he took out his slate and writing something upon it handed it to the colonel, who read this startling inquiry:

"Have you ever mistrusted treachery in your train?"

"My God, no!" exclaimed the colonel, excitedly; "such a thing is impossible, Hercules!"

"I believe there is a traitor among your men," wrote the scout.

The colonel made no reply. He seemed like one stricken speechless. He turned and glanced at the faces of those around him as if to pick out the traitor, but there was not one among the many upon whom he could fix the terrible charge. Yet he had no reason to dispute the man's sagacity, and in order to keep down excitement, and trap the guilty party, he said nothing, but took the giant's slate and pencil and asked the question:

"What makes you think so, Hercules?"

"I have my reasons for it," was the rather evasive reply of the slate.

"Do you know the man?" Owens again asked on the slate.

"No," was the prompt admission.

"Then," declared the colonel to himself, "Niobrara Jack, the guide, is the traitor! Oh, if this be true, may Heaven help my poor child!"

Scarcely able to restrain his emotions the distract ed man turned and walked away. Presently he called John Lane aside and made known to him Dumb Hercules's suspicions. They talked the matter over together. The colonel told Lane whom he suspected, if there was a traitor at all among them. He gave his reasons for it; Old Jack was the only man of the party who had ever been in that part of the country, and who could possibly know and be in collusion with the savages.

"Colonel, it may be there is a traitor in our party," said John Lane, "but I cannot think Old Jack is a y more the traitor than Black Bob, the driver of the coach the girls were in."

"No, no; Black Bob has grown up from boyhood under my eyes. He never saw a savage till he entered Dakota. But, may be time will tell. Dumb Hercules seems averse to being questioned. He is a mysterious man."

Quiet being restored in camp, the women prepared dinner, and while some of the men stood guard on the margin of the grove, the others sat down to the repast. Dumb Hercules dined with them.

After dinner the colonel and Mr. Lane discussed the propriety of the party going out in search of the girls, but before the idea had assumed any definite shape it was abandoned as being impracticable, owing to the fact that the fog had again settled over the plain, deeper and darker than ever.

So all that could be done was to watch, wait and hope; and thus the hours passed. All dreaded the coming night, for they knew the darkness would afford the red-skins a cover under which to make another attack; but to the surprise of all, the fog again disappeared as the shadows of night came on, and within an hour after dark the moon and stars were shining brightly.

Dumb Hercules in the mean time had promised to remain with the train, at least until Old Jack returned, and after night had set in he and Colonel Owens left the camp to make a reconnaissance of the surrounding plain, leaving the camp in charge of Tom Woolson.

With head erect and eye and ear on the alert like a deer that scented danger, the voiceless giant moved along the plain with an almost noiseless footstep, requiring no little exertion on the part of Gershom Owens to keep up with him.

When a mile or so from camp the giant scout would stop ever and anon, and dropping to his knees, place his ear to the earth and listen. This had he repeated several times when he suddenly sprung to his feet and half-crouching, motioned to the colonel to follow him. He then led the way toward a cluster of tall sage brush, wherein the two concealed themselves.

The colonel could now hear the faint sound of a horse's feet. He saw Dumb Hercules draw an arrow from his quiver and lay it alongside his bow, ready for instant use.

The sound of hoof-strokes grew plainer, and with bated breath the two men crouched in the shadows. Soon a horse and rider came into view, at a slow walk, and halted within a few paces of them. The horse seemed all a-tremble with fright. Its head was in the air, its nostrils distended, its ears pointed forward as though it had detected the presence of danger in the sage bushes.

As for the rider, it required but a single glance for Colonel Owens to recognize him. It was Old Niobrara Jack, the guide!

The head of the old man was bare, while over his shoulders and around his form was an Indian blanket.

At sight of him the feeling of mistrust which Dumb Hercules's words had aroused in the colonel's breast deepened into a feeling of resentment. His bare head and that Indian blanket seemed, at a glance, to confirm his suspicious of the old guide's treachery; but a second glance at the old man's face, upon which the moonbeams fell brightly, caused him to start violently.

"Hercules," the colonel whispered, in no little agitation, "that is Niobrara Jack, my guide! What ails the fellow? He acts so queer—he acts like a drunken man. Shall I speak to him?"

The scout nodded his head.

"Hullo, Jack, old friend!" called the colonel, but at sound of his voice the horse instantly took flight and dashed away, the body of his rider reeling and swaying on his back like a drunken man.

Quickly the two men sprung to their feet, Hercules turned to the colonel and with a wild, excited look on his face thrust out his index finger at the flying horseman and shook his head excitedly.

"My God! Hercules, what can all the man!" exclaimed the colonel, white with excitement.

The giant scout took his slate from his pocket and wrote upon it in large letters—easily read in the moonlight—the single word:

"DEAD!"

CHAPTER VI.

A PAIR OF ODD CHARACTERS.

"My God!" burst from the lips of Gershom Owens, "can it be possible that Old Jack is dead?"

The scout nodded his head repeatedly as he gazed away in the direction the lifeless horseman had gone.

"Then," continued the colonel, "Jack is not the traitor; but my poor girl! Oh, curse the fate that is crushing my heart!"

Dumb Hercules stepped out into the moonlight and was followed by the distracted father.

They began to retrace their footsteps toward camp, where they arrived in due course of time with the sad and startling news of Old Jack's being a lifeless wanderer under the solemn moonlight, on the great prairie—the victim of savage vengeance.

Colonel Owens and several of his friends were seated in the former's tent, engaged in conversation, when they were suddenly startled by the voice of one of the guards shouting:

"Who comes there?"

"I, a weary pilgrim—name, Skylark Sam, at your service," was the answer of the chaleng'd stranger.

"Then advance," replied the guard, "and report yourself at once to Colonel Owens."

"That's just what I'm all in a tear to do," returned the stranger.

"Skylark Sam!" exclaimed Colonel Owens, springing to his feet; "can it be possible that we're to have that famous scout and detective for a guest?"

The guard conducted the stranger to the colonel's tent and introduced him. Not one of the party had ever seen the famous scout and detective, and all were not a little surprised when they looked upon that individual.

He was a tall, gaunt man of perhaps forty-five years of age, with a rough, bearded face, a short, flat nose, and a small, gray eye, overhung with long, bristling brows. He was dressed in buckskin, and carried a pair of revolvers and a knife in his girdle. He was, in general appearance, a veritable borderman, but with none of the striking peculiarities about him that those who had heard of Skylark Sam imagined he possessed.

"Skylark Sam!" exclaimed the colonel, taking the stranger's hand, "is it possible I have the pleasure and honor of welcoming him to my tent?"

"Don't know as it is any honor or pleasure, Colonel Owens," replied the scout with off-hand independence, "but I am Skylark Samuel, at your service."

"Well, I'm glad to meet you—glad you happened this way, for I can assure you we're in need of experienced plainsmen about this time," declared Owens. "By the way, you're the man who does some scouting in a balloon, are you not?"

"I'm that same aerial angel, colonel, tho' I'm on a terrestrial tear at this time. I was up the river to-day, and hearin' the poundin' o' an old cannon down this way, I come to the conclusion that somebody and the Ingins war havin' a leetle old Tippecanoe tilt-and-tumble, and so I come down to investigate the matter. That's what brought me here, and now that I am here, you can draw on me for any kind o' work, from scoutin' to diggin' rifle-pits—use me anywhere—for breastworks or gun-slob' When it comes to fightin', you'll find me a holy bull-terrier—a hull litter o' wildcats—a buffalier-bull ith a curl in the forehead."

"Well, Skylark, you were right in that we had quite a lively fight down hereabouts to-day, and we won a grand victory and never lost a man," said Colonel Owens.

"Them's the kind o' battles to win, colonel, for it's too bad for any honest white man to shed a drap o' blood at the hand o' a savage," responded the scout. "I hate a red-skin as the devil hates holy-water, and I'll be the happiest man on the globe when the last varmint o' them are under the sod."

"You say you come from up the river, Sam?" asked Tom Woolson.

"I did, sir."

"Did you see any Indians?"

"I saw a pack 'bout evenin' movin' up the river as though they war expectin' to be cycloned at any minit."

"Skylark," asked Owens, "did you notice whether they had any captives?"

"I think not, colonel; why, some o' your folks missin'?"

"My daughter and another young lady are gone. We do not know whether they have fallen into savage hands or not, but one thing we do know, and that is that our guide, whom we sent out in search of them, has been murdered."

"Hill-flags! you don't say so!" exclaimed the Border Detective, starting up excitedly.

"Hullo, colonel," suddenly interrupted a voice at the door of the tent—the voice of one of the guards, "here's another pilgrim-stranger that's wandered into our folds; says his name is Reverend Prosper Twomby."

With this the new-comer was ushered into the tent, and at sight of him, Skylark Sam burst into a roar of laughter. In fact, it was as much as the others could do to restrain their emotions, for the stranger was an odd-looking genius.

He was rather tall, slender and ungainly in his proportions, with long, white hair and beard—both thin and unkempt—and the face of a clown. But his dress was the comical part of the man. His coat was of the "swallow-tail" style, and its odd-colored patches and threadbare condition denoted its antiquity. His pants, also threadbare and patched at the knees with buckskin, fitted him almost as tightly as the skin. Hob-nailed shoes were upon his feet, while a crushed and battered "tile" tilted back upon his head completed his garb. In his hand he carried a knotted cane—no weapons being visible about him.

As he entered the tent he bowed politely, doffing his hat and saying, with an unctuous smile:

"Good-evenin', gentlemen."

"Good-evening, sir; did I understand the guard to say you were Reverend Prosper Twomby?" observed Colonel Owens.

"That was right, sir—Reverend Prosper Twomby, of Boston—and I have called to beg lodgin' with you for the night."

"Cracked in the upper story, by smoke!" averred Skylark Sam.

"Well, sir," responded the colonel, "you can stay, although our accommodations are not the best, and we may have to fight to hold what we have before morning."

"Fight?" exclaimed the Rev. Twomby, in apparent surprise; "with whom?"

"The Ingins."

"Salvation! Are they on the war-path?"

"That makes the reverend gentleman nervous," observed Old Skylark Sam, with a chuckle.

"Which way are you traveling, Mr. Twomby?" asked the colonel.

"I am on my way to the Indian country in the interest of humanity."

"Hoop-ee!" exclaimed Skylark; "an' Ingin-slay'er. I'll bet!"

"Just the reverse of it, sir," retorted Twomby, indignantly. "This Ingin question has now been agitating the people for years and years. The Western people, led on by the hunters and trappers and ranchmen, say 'kill'—'slaughter'—'extirminate'—"

"That's my sentiments," interrupted Old Skylark.

"But I say," went on the preacher, "to civilize 'em. Now this has been somewhat the policy o' the Government, but for some reason r other it's been a failure. I know that are somethin' wrong, and in an interview with the President I kid before him my Ingin policy, and I told him I war goin' to make a journey to the Ingin country and look over the situation—study the Ingin character from a moral, social, physical and intellectual standpoint. The President thought that war the true way to git into the merits o' the matter, and asked me to make a detailed report on my return to Boston."

"What is your policy, Mr. Twomby?" asked the colonel, seeing that the old fellow was affording his friends no little amusement.

"My policy—the Twomby policy is to give the Ingins a fair show with the rest o' mankind. First, I'd send every soldier to some summer resort, then tear down the forts. I'd send every miner out o' the hills, and I'd drive every hunter, settler and ranchman beyond the extreme limits o' whar the buffalo and antelope range. Then I'd divide up the land—give every able-bodied Ingin a quarter-section o' land, furnish him a team, tools and—"

"A barrel o' whisky," claimed 'n Old Skylark.

"No, jist whisky enough for medicinal, culinary and mechanical purposes," went on the preacher.

"Oh, what a miserable old seed turnip you be, Twomby! Give us a rest or I'll have to go out and settle my stomach," and Old Skylark made a grimace as if he had the colic.

"Seems as if you hav'n't a good opinion o' me, old sinner," remarked Twomby, turning on the facetious Skylark. "P'raps if you knowed me better you wouldn't walk upon your bits so strong."

"Whew!" ejaculated the detective, "that sounds theaterish-like. Now, mebbe you'd like to try the stuff Old Skylark Sam's made of? If so, shed yer swallow-tail hat and plug coat and slap me once on the cheek."

"Gentlemen, I want no—"

"Excuse me, colonel," interposed Skylark Sam, "for bein' so ungentlemanly as to talk so in your tent to the stranger. I confess I'm a leetle careless 'bout slingin' language 'round loose, but, ye see, that's kind o' second nater to us old scou's and border scavengers. But, colonel, I war goin' to ax you while ago if you are well fortified, and well guarded against a surprise. Thar's no tellin' what might happen in an Ingin kentry."

"Well, Sam, I have felt that we were pretty well fixed," replied Owens, "but since you have the

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reputation of an old Indian-fighter, scout, and so forth, I'd like to show you how we are fixed, and make any other improvement you might suggest."

The Border Detective readily consented to a tour of inspection, so Owens procured a lantern and they started off. They visited the rifle-pits, the corral where the stock was kept, and finally the howitzer.

"That's the stuff to fight Ingins with, colonel," declared Old Skylark, patting the gun; "the snort o' a cannon is a holy terror to a red nigger. They can't stand the pressure."

The old scout finally pronounced the colonel's defense almost impregnable. He could see no place that could be strengthened, and in view of the fact that he had promised to remain with him over night, the colonel felt easier in mind, and so they returned to the tent.

In the mean time, Dumb Hercules had kept entirely to himself, in the shadows. He seemed to prefer being alone, and never once showed himself in the tent after the arrival of Skylark Sam and Rev. Prosper Twomby.

After returning to his tent and finding no one there, the colonel and Skylark sat down and entered into conversation.

"Colonel, what do you think of that Rev. Prosper Twomby?" the scout finally asked.

"Oh, he's an eccentric, shallow-pated old exhorter who imagines he has had a call to settle the great question as to what shall be done with the Indian; but I've an idea the Indians'll settle him before he is aware of it."

"Well, he may be a fool, colonel," replied Skylark Sam, "but I'm inclined to think he's a bit sharper than he'd have us believe. I observe he's doin' a good deal o' nosin' round outside, and think he might be watched a little. I believe I'll slip out and just see what he is up to, anyhow, and waltz him in where we can watch him," and the detective arose and went out.

Finding himself alone, Gershon Owens's thoughts turned to his lost child, and he bowed his head in silent grief.

Skylark Sam moved away through the shadows toward the river, then by a circuitous route he passed along the edge of the grove on an evident tour of inspection. He moved on until within a few paces of the little moonlit opening in which stood the howitzer—the dark muzzle of which he could just see projecting past the bushes—when he stopped and listened.

Hearing nothing the detective passed into the opening and approached the gun. In one hand he now held a short iron rod—evidently a part of an iron ramrod—and in the other an Indian hatchet. Reaching his hand out he ran his fingers over the breech of the cannon until he found the vent. Into this he placed one end of the rod and was in the act of raising the hatchet to drive home the spike when a voice said quickly:

"Hold, villain!"

And then from the shadows on the opposite side glided the form of Reverend Prosper Twomby, with a revolver leveled full at the breast of the border scout!

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT OF DEATH.

"STRIKE that spike, curse you!" cried the preacher, in a voice stern, fierce and determined. "and I'll be withered if I don't drill you through and through, you monumental impostor! Drop that hatchet and elevate your slimy paws! Ha! ha! spike the cannon, will you, you tool of Satan? Come, waltz out now, and surrender gracefully, or I'll let slip this purp o' war!"

The voice of Twomby had reached the ears of a guard, whose footsteps were now heard approaching. The confronted villain started back aghast. Thwarted in his attempt to spike the gun—standing face to face with death, his only chance for life now lay in leaping back into the shadows. Caught as he was in the very act of criminal treachery, he knew that to surrender would be certain death, and summoning all his strength, he leaped backward into the bushes. But the simulated preacher seemed to have anticipated this very movement, and, simultaneous with his leap, the pistol cracked and the villain fell dead, shot through the brain.

The report of the weapon brought every man of the train hurrying to the scene of the tragedy, believing another attack was being made on the camp.

"What's up?—in Heaven's name what's up?" exclaimed Colonel Owens, as he came dashing through the undergrowth.

"Nothing up, colonel," replied Twomby, coolly pointing to the prostrate body; "but that's what's down. I had to shoot that feller to keep him from spikin' your gun."

"My God, sir!" shouted the colonel, "haven't you made a mistake? Skylark Sam would not be guilty of such a thing!"

"No; you bet your gastric accouterments he wouldn't, colonel," answered Twomby; "but that dead dog was *not* Skylark Sam, but an infamous outlaw—a spy sent into your camp by Standing Bear, the Indian chief, and Black Diablo, the outlaw leader, who are in cahoots."

"Twomby, how do you know this—that that man was not Skylark Sam, the Border Detective?"

"Because I, myself, colonel, happen to be Skylark Sam!"

Had a thunderbolt exploded over the heads of his auditors it would not have caused greater consternation.

"What?" demanded the colonel, "you Skylark Sam?"

"You jest bet your bottom ducat, colonel, that

I'm that very old aerial pilgrim, and I've got the papers right in my clothes to show for it, too."

"Then why are you here under an assumed name while another comes wearing your cognomen?"

"That's where the antelope comes in," replied the man, "and I'll tell you about it. To-day when you and the red-skins had your battle, I was up the river watching the movements of Black Diablo in hopes of gettin' him alone so's I could get the drap on him. I was concealed in a holler cottonwood log in a *motte*. I'd crawled in there on makin' the discovery that the outlaws were coming up. And they did come and stopped in that grove. A couple o' hours after the battle the Ingins come up and joined Black Diablo all broke up over the grubbin' you'd given 'em. Wal, you may bet your ducats I begun to feel nervous, and the way my heart pounded that log wer'n't no small matter—specially after 'bout fourteen Ingins come and set down on it. But oh, ladder o' Jacob! how that Standing Bear *did* storm over his defeat, and Black Diablo—why, he just cussed a blue streak and frothed at the mouth. And their defeat they laid solely to this cannon—big devil gun—old Standin' Bear called it, while Black Diablo applied the most sulphureous language I ever heard come from human lips. But, altho' whipped, they were not conquered, and so the cannon must be spiked and the attack tried again. It was then arranged that that dead sinner there should come to your camp after night and play Skylark Sam and git around and spike the gun. To be sure, both the red-skins and outlaws knew I was in the country, for I'd played the 'celestial' on the Ingins the night before but as they supposed I was up the Belle Fourche, and knowin' by some means or other that none o' you folks knew me, they so figgered that the Skylark game'd work. So, as soon as I got out o' that log, and it was mighty soon after the devils left, I made for here, too. Now, you can guess the rest, gentlemen, and if you demand further proof of my being Skylark Sam you can have it."

"Well, we don't want it as that fellow got it," said Colonel Owens, pointing to the dead impostor: "but for my part I'm satisfied that you're the true Skylark, and greet you as such. As tenderfeet we acknowledge our gullibility."

"And here, too! here, too!" shouted the rest of the emigrants.

"Then, that settles it, gentlemen," assented the true Border Detective, "yet I am afraid that, though the skylarking renegade is dead, and the cannon unspiked, the Indians will attack you gain to-night. Within an hour after the gun was spiked, that spy was to fire off a pistol, providin' he couldn't get away without rousing your suspicion. They may take the report of my pistol for its signal. Men, I advise you to stay by your guns—redouble your vigilance and be ready for—"

Before he had finished the sentence the ears of the colonists were greeted by a blood-curdling yell in the direction of the river.

"Gods! they're here now!" cried the detective. "To arms! to arms! and fight your best!"

The detective rushed in the direction whence a series of wild demoniac yells were coming, followed by the emigrants, and in the moonlight, on the banks of the river they beheld Dumb Hercules surrounded by savages that had swarmed up from behind the river-bank, engaged in a deadly struggle. The great, voiceless man's form towered head and shoulders above the wild, seething mass around him.

Clutching a heavy rifle from the hands of a red-skin he used it as a club—doing frightful work in the ranks of the foe. Around and around he spun upon his heel so fast—mowing a circle around him—keeping open a space the savages could not fill—that his weapon, glinting in the moonbeams, seemed to surround his form with a nimbus of flame.

Desperately the Dumb Hercules continued his struggle in silence—unable to cry out—to call for help; but, suddenly, with a wild, fierce whoop, Old Skylark Sam came bounding into the fray, with a revolver in each hand, followed by the rest of Owens's men. Then the conflict—hand-to-hand—waxed hotter than ever, and for several moments it raged with unabated fury and without any perceptible advantage being gained by either side. Colonel Owens, however, knowing the savages' inborn fear of a cannon, proceeded to fire the great gun—not at the foe, for friends would have been in equal danger—but out across the plain; and as it crashed out with a peal like that of thunder it struck surprise and terror to the hearts of the red-skins, who believed the great gun had been silenced. Like sheep they turned and began to leap over behind the river-bank, but before many of them had done so, there came a yell from out upon the plain, and the next moment a score of mounted savages came thundering to the help of their friends!

The wavering savages rallied, and the contest was renewed; but still another surprise awaited the contestants. A bugle's sharp blast mingled with the shouts of white men rung through the night, and the next moment a band of horsemen with swords flashing in the moonlight came charging to the scene of bat'tle.

"The rangers! the rangers! hurrah for Dare Devil Dick!" yelled Old Skylark Sam.

The mounted Indians and the rangers met near the scene of the contest between those on foot. With a shout and a yell they came together, and for a few brief moments a fierce and bloody struggle ensued, in the midst of which the boom of the old howitzer again crashed through the night, lending an additional terror to the sound of clashing sabers, dull, sudden blows of tomahawks, crashing of firearms, plunging of horses, shrieks of the dying, and yells and shouts of the combatants.

Still in the midst of the thickest of the fray stood

Dumb Hercules dealing death and destruction with his terrible whip of iron—seeming to bear a charmed life against the weapons of the Indians.

The savages on foot used knives and tomahawks. This was evidence of the fact that they had crossed the river by swimming, bringing no firearms—expecting to find that side of the camp unguarded, and by a timely co-operation of their mounted friends had expected an easy victory. And in this they would have been entirely successful had it not been for the vigilance of Dumb Hercules.

In a brief time this second conflict had ended, and victory again crowned the arms of the immigrants. The red-skins on foot leaped over the bank and swam the river, while those that were mounted fled northward.

The victory, however, had been purchased most dearly. Four of the immigrants and three of the rangers were slain, while few escaped without more or less injury—several being seriously wounded. Colonel Owens himself was knocked down by a flying tomahawk, but as his injury was only slight, he remained on the field until the conflict had ended, and then gave his attention to the care of the wounded whom he had removed to his own tent, where Doctor Bales, of the emigrants, speedily cared for them.

In the confusion and excitement of the hour the colonel, as well as all the others, had failed to notice the absence of Dumb Hercules; but when he did notice it he turned to Tom Woolson and asked:

"Tom, have you seen Dumb Hercules since the fight?"

"I have not, colonel, I'm sorry to say," replied Tom.

Advancing to where a heap of dead savages lay—at the point where the battle had raged the fiercest—the colonel beheld the giant form of the scut lying prone upon the earth, with the body of a savage lying across it.

"Oh, heavens!" the colonel cried, "he is here!—dead! dead!" and, overcome with emotions of grief, he turned, and walking away, sat down. "Oh, where is this to end?" he again broke forth in a voice of bitter anguish.

"I'll tell ye, colonel," said Old Skylark Sam, who had overheard his words. "I think it's already ended—that them red-skins will not tackle this on fit soon again, if at all. Jacob's Ladder! I never saw such a mass o' pizen catamounts to fight as you folks and them rangers are."

"Ay, Sim, but Dumb Hercules, the noblest Roman of them all, is dead—so is poor Old Jack, our guide."

The rangers were prevailed upon to remain over night with the immigrants, and while in conversation with them the colonel received the first tidings from Zulima and Kitty. But when he learned that their own gallant leader, Dare Devil Dick, had mysteriously disappeared while endeavoring to aid them—that his horse was caught riderless on the plain, that the coach was found empty and almost buried out of sight in the river, the last faint hope died out of his breast, and he bowed himself in quiet submission under his great burden of sorrow and grief.

An hour had passed. The wounded had all been cared for, and a party had just been detailed to go out and bury the dead, when all were startled by a thunderous splash in the river near where the fight had occurred.

Hurrying to the edge of the grove, what was the surprise of the party to see Dumb Hercules, the Silent Scout, standing erect in the midst of his fallen enemies, and taking up one body after another and hurling it out into the river as though it were a mere trifles of a few pounds.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted Old Skylark Sam, tossing his damaged rifle into the air; "Dumb Hercules still lives!"

And the immigrants took up the refrain, and made the very plains resound with their shouts of joy.

Colonel Owens, beside himself with joy at the news of the giant's being alive rushed headlong to the silent man's side and grasped his hand. Looking up he was about to speak, when he started back at the light that met his gaze. The scout's face was covered with blood flowing from a wound on the head; but out of this crimson mask shone his eyes with the wild, unearthly light of a maddened demon.

For a moment the colonel was struck dumb, but recovering his senses, he said:

"Come with me, Hercules, you are hurt."

Without offering the least resistance the half-delirious giant turned and was led like a child to the surgeon's tent.

The party detailed to bury the dead consisted of ten men—Tom Woolson having the sad work in charge. The fallen immigrants and rangers were first interred, a short and fervent prayer being offered at the graves by Ishmael Morse, a good and devout Christian man.

Then a long grave, or trench, was dug, in which to give their dead foes a Christian burial. One by one the red-skins were carried and placed side by side in the grave. While this was being done, a young immigrant, named Jerrold Curl, nicknamed "Little Curley," on account of his dark, wavy hair, came out, and as each body was brought forward he scanned the face closely. His actions attracted the attention of his friends, notwithstanding the fact that he had always been regarded as a strange and eccentric youth, in that he always manifested a disposition to be by himself. But, for all this, "Little Curley" was liked. He was an excellent horseman and a fine shot, and had no superior in the party in handling the drove of cattle belonging to the train. In view of this, he had been selected as head-drover for the trip, and had performed his duty well and faithfully so far.

Not one of the party had ever met the boy until a

few days before the train started for the Niobrara country. A perfect stranger, he went to Colonel Owens and begged permission to accompany him. The colonel was so pleased with the youth's bright face and manly demeanor that he at once enrolled his name as one of his future colonists. But they had not been long together ere the colonel, as well as his friends, saw that the boy was an odd character, and the longer they were together the more of an enigma he became. And his presence there among the burying party—examining the faces of the dead so closely—seemed to envelop him in the dim shadow of a mystery.

The removal of the dead, however, to the grave was going silently and sadly on, when one of the party suddenly called out:

"By George, boys! here's an Injin got whiskers, but I reckon it's a white man in disguise of a red-skin."

Scarcely had the words fallen from the man's lips ere Little Curley was at the dead man's side. Stooping over, the boy glanced at the face, uttered a wild, piercing shriek, and fell forward across the body.

"My God! Curley, what is the matter?" asked the man at his side, but only a low, sobbing gasp, like one smothering, answered him, while the lad's slender form began to tremble and shake as if racked by inward convulsions of sudden grief.

"Curley, what does this mean?" repeated the man, grasping the boy by the arm; "tell me, boy, what is that dead man to you?"

"Oh, let me be!" cried the lad, lifting a white, grief-stricken face toward heaven; "let me be! leave me alone!"

Attracted by his cry Colonel Owens came hurrying to the spot, and in a moment the lad was surrounded by the excited colonists, who stood silent and dumfounded, gazing upon the startling scene.

"Curley, my boy," spoke Colonel Owens, bending over and speaking kindly to the lad, "what does this mean? Do you know that man, Curley?"

"Oh, colonel!" the boy moaned, lifting his streaming eyes and looking into Owens's face, "that man is my father!"

An exclamation of profound surprise burst from the lips of the spectators. Colonel Owens seemed dazed by the lad's startling declaration, but recovering his composure, he said:

"Curley, surely you are mistaken in this man being your father."

"No, no, colonel, I am not," replied the boy, wringing his hands in grief; "it is you that has been mistaken—ay, deceived in me!"

"I do not understand you, Curley."

"I say I have deceived you; this man is an outlaw—a renegade, and I am his child. Life to me now will be a burden, and if you will only shoot me and bury me with my poor, dear, wicked father, you will confer a blessing on me. Oh, colonel! I have been a traitor to you—I joined your train—sought admission into your confidence in order to betray you into the power of Black Diablo and the Indians. To-day, when the fog hung the darkest over the prairie, I left Homer and Ted with the cattle, and under cover of the fog rode around and struck the trail near this grove where I was, by previous arrangements, to meet an Indian scout and give him information as to your strength. I came and met the Indian, told him of your numbers and of your having a cannon in your possession. You were to have been attacked a mile further on, but Dumb Hercules defeated Black Diablo. While we stood conversing an arrow from the giant's bow laid the Indian low in death, and to escape a similar fate I mounted and rode hastily away and around to my position as a drover in the rear of the train. Dumb Hercules did not recognize me when we met, for I kept my face covered with a silk handkerchief."

"Then the giant was right," said the amazed immigrant; "he said there was a traitor in my party, but God knows you were the last one I'd suspected, Curley."

"I know it, colonel," confessed the grief-stricken boy; "you have been kind to me—all of you, and I cannot ask for mercy. Oh! I want to die and be buried with my poor father! I am tired of the wild, wicked and exciting life I have loved so well in the past."

"Curley," and the colonel's voice was gentle, sympathetic, "you are young—you can turn from this life of wickedness and become a good man yet."

"No, no, colonel, I cannot!" the youth fairly shrieked, "for I am not what I appear to you. I am not a boy, but a girl!—the daughter of that man, Mask Tanity!"

"Great God! what next?" cried Owens, his face the very picture of profound astonishment.

A silence deep and profound fell upon the party, and the scene that was presented there under the pale moonlight was wild, weird and heart-rending. There lay the dead outlaw stretched at full length upon the earth, his glassy eyes staring up into the sky, and his child bending over him, her frail form shaking like a reed in the wind in her convulsions of grief. Around them stood the grave-diggers, leaning upon their spades, and the rangers in their odd and picturesque uniforms. Hard by the long open grave waited the rest of its inmates, while just beyond this lay the shadows of the grove, black and grim. And to complete the awful scene, a horseman suddenly came galloping around the *mote* and stopped short within a few paces of the silent, awe-stricken group.

"My God! it is Old Jack, our guide!" cried Tom Woolson, starting toward the horseman.

But the horse, seeming to take fright at the sound of his excited voice, whirled and dashed away over the plain, its silent rider swaying to and fro, helpless, voiceless—dead in the saddle!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ANGEL OF MERCY.

It was so ordained that the life of Zulima Owens and of her friend, Kitty Lane, was not to perish in the treacherous river, for at the last moment, when the world was fading from Zulima's view—unconsciousness was coming to save her from the horrors of the rising waters, her ears were greeted by the splash of a paddle in the river. The sound acted like magic on her failing senses, and starting up she gazed around her. Her eyes fell upon a canoe descending the stream but a few yards away. Its occupant was a young girl fair of face and form—one to whom Zulima instinctively felt that she could appeal in her distress, and stretching out her hands she cried out:

"Help! help! we are sinking in the sand!"

"Oh, how dreadful!" cried the fair stranger, as with quick strokes of the paddle she swung her light bark canoe alongside the coach, on the upstream side. "What does this mean?" she then asked.

"Our driver was slain by the Indians, and our team ran away and plunged into the river. The poor beasts are drowned, and we are sinking," Zulima replied, her pretty face white with terror.

"Then it is well for you that I happened here," said the girl in the boat; "come, step into my boat, and I will take you ashore."

Placing Dare Devil Dick's revolver in her pocket, Zulima, followed by Kitty, who had recovered from her swoon, stepped out of the coach into the boat and seated themselves. Then the stranger pushed away from the vehicle, swung out into current and headed for the shore.

Now that she was, for the time being, out of danger, Zulima had an opportunity to look upon her rescuer and study her fair, strange face. She saw that she was a young girl of perhaps sixteen, with eyes and hair as black as midnight, and features and complexion of unmistakable Spanish type. She was dressed in a neat and tidy frock reaching a little below her knees. Her feet and limbs were incased in buckskin moccasins and leggings fancifully wrought in figures with various-colored beads. On her head was a jaunty little straw hat banded with a broad blue ribbon.

It required but a few strokes of the paddle to carry the boat to the shore, and as it slowly swung around against the bank the dark-eyed beauty asked:

"Now, girls, where do you go?"

"God only knows!" answered Zulima, sadly.

"Where do you belong?—what is your name?"

"My name is Zulima Owens, and my friend's Kitty Lane. We belong to a colonist train somewhere along the Cheyenne. And now may I ask to whom we are indebted for our rescue?"

"Inez Bienville. I live in a secluded home up the river, and you will be welcome to go back with me, and remain there until you know where to find your friends. If the Indians are abroad they would be sure almost to get you."

"My dear friend," said Zulima, "I presume our only safe course will be to accept your kind invitation."

"Then we had better not tarry here," answered Inez, and dipping her paddle the little craft began to creep through the water.

They discussed the surrounding dangers as they moved along, and the indifferent manner in which Inez seemed to treat the matter of Indian troubles awakened no little surprise in the breasts of her two protegees.

After journeying perhaps half a mile the river bank began to rise in rough and precipitous bluffs, whose fagades were covered with brush and creeping vines, being crowned with a growth of stunted pine and hemlock. Another half-mile and they came to where the river, narrow and deep, swept between two towering bluffs that rose straight up from the water's-edge. The sides facing the river were draped with a confused mesh of vines that trailed their green festoonery down into the stream, giving the place a wild and romantic appearance.

"My home," explained Inez, pointing to the right bluff, "is in yonder great hill. I know it will surprise you when you enter it."

"Then it is a cavern?" asked Zulima.

"Yes, but entirely the work of man. We call it the 'dug-out,'" and a smile passed over the girl's face, "though the true name of the place is the Hidden Home."

"Do your father and mother dwell there with you?" Zulima queried, as the many stories of caverns and outlaws that she had heard came trooping up in her mind.

To her surprise Inez made no response to her question, but turning her boat, ran in under the towering bluff, and the next moment they came to a halt in a cavern at the foot of a stairway leading up into the hill.

Seizing the end of a small rope, Inez gave it a slight pull, and the far-off tinkle of a bell came faintly to their ears.

A few moments later a dim light in the hands of a fat negress glared down into their faces from the top of the steps, and a voice asked:

"Dat you, Miss Inez?"

"Yes, Ruth, and I have brought some company with me. Come on down with the light."

"Great Lor! Company? What de ole massa—" began Ruth, as she came waddling down the steps; but her words were cut short by Inez, who exclaimed:

"Hurry along, Aunt Ruth, with the light; these girls are tired and hungry, I know."

"Gals, did ye say? Wal, I declar', honey!" the negress exclaimed, as she stopped on the lower step

and looked into the faces of the two girls; "whar on earth you find dem, honey?"

"Down the river in distress," replied Inez, stepping from the boat and assisting her guests to land on the broad, stone steps; "but now you can lead the way with the light, Ruth."

"Wal, I jist swan, honey!" decided the negress, as she turned and started up the stairs, "dey's jist as purty as picters, ar'n't dey?"

After climbing two flights of steps, which Zulima saw had been dug in the hard earth, they came to a door through which they passed into a spacious room.

"Now, Ruth," commanded the young mistress of the Home, "you want to prepare us something to eat, quick as you can, and bring it to my room."

"Yes—honey," replied the negress, panting like a porpoise, from her exertions in ascending the stairs, "jis' soon—as I can—git my bref goin'—ag'in."

Inez conducted her guests into a room that was evidently her own private apartment. It had a window looking out over the river, though concealed from without by the trailing vines, that admitted pure air and sufficient light. It was comfortably furnished for an isolated cavern home, and to the two maidens there was something savoring of romantic mystery about the apartment, the Hidden Home, and its inmates.

Having seen her guests comfortably seated, Inez excused herself and left the room.

Zulima and Kitty discussed their situation, the perils they had passed through, and the probable fate in store for them. And the longer they dwelt upon the mystery surrounding the Hidden Home the more restless they became, until they finally worked themselves into the belief that the place was the retreat of outlaws.

To set their minds at rest upon this matter, they resolved to ask Inez as soon as she returned, notwithstanding she had once evaded a direct question regarding her home and friends, and had stopped old Ruth, who was about to make some disclosure as to her master.

It was nearly an hour, however, before Inez returned, and when she did, she brought with her on a wooden tray some nicely cooked viands, which she spread on a little, low shelf, and then turning to her guests, said:

"Girls, I know you are hungry. Such es our home affords I have brought you, and I hope you will now sit up and partake freely and heartily."

The maidens did not wait for any further ceremony, for the presence of the tempting viands sharpened their gnawing hunger, and they moved up to the shelf and ate what, to them, seemed the most savory and delicious repast they had ever enjoyed.

After they had been refreshed, and old Ruth had cleared away the dishes, Inez sat down and entered into conversation with them. Zulima watched for an opportunity to carry out her resolution to question Inez about her home and friends; but Inez led the conversation so adroitly, it seemed, that her guest could not broach the subject uppermost in her mind without doing so abruptly and in a way that she feared might convey the idea of suspicion, and thereby offend her hostess, who had been so kind to her and Kitty.

Zulima again narrated the story of her and Kitty's adventure in the coach, the attempted rescue by the young ranger, the last of whom she had seen as he sunk beneath the waves in the river.

"Did you ascertain his name, Zulima?" asked Inez.

"No; but I believe it was the same person who visited us as a 'cowboy' when we were in camp on the Missouri."

"It must have been Dare Devil Dick," Inez averred, with some agitation, which did not escape the notice of the girl.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten," Zulima suddenly exclaimed, "that I have his revolver which he tossed into the coach when he rode up alongside. Here it is."

Inez took the revolver and examined it. A cry burst from her lips. She turned and looked wildly at Zulima.

"It is Dare Devil Dick's!" she said. "His name is upon it."

"Do you know the young ranger, Inez?" asked Kitty.

"I have seen him," she replied; "he is a brave, handsome and gallant youth."

"Poor fe low!" said Zulima, sadly. "I am afraid he met his death in his effort to save us."

Her words seemed to affect Inez deeply. She stood silent and thoughtful for several moments; then turning to her guests, said:

"Girls, I must ask you to excuse me again. I may be absent an hour, and perhaps more. Should you want anything call Aunt Ruth, who will be in the adjoining room."

So saying, she left the room, and in doing so she left her guests involved more deeply than ever in the belief that a strange mystery hung over and around the Hidden Home.

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE SURPRISE.

To return to Dare Devil Dick.

The moment the young ranger clinched with his antagonist on the top of the coach he found he had no mean foe to combat. In fact, he found the supposed savage was a white man in disguise—a man of great strength and activity.

Dick himself was noted for his strength, suppleness and dexterous skill as a wrestler and it was only by calling this skill into play that he prevented the renegade from overpowering him with his great weight and brute force at the beginning of the

Hercules, the Dumb Destroyer.

struggle. He found that he could only act upon the defensive, and while he dare not release a hand to draw a weapon, he made it his aim to prevent the renegade from drawing his.

The sudden plunge of the coach into the river, however, ended the struggle, whose determination otherwise would have been exceedingly doubtful. Both were thrown violently forward, striking upon their heads against the dash-board; then, rolling off the vehicle, their heads again struck with full force on the left fore-wheel of the coach, stunning them so as to break their holds.

Dick had just consciousness enough left to realize that he was in the river, but had scarcely strength sufficient to battle with his new enemy, the waves, and the result was that he was carried rapidly down the stream. But he finally succeeded in getting ashore. Just how he managed to do so he never knew. On his hands and knees he crept into a clump of bushes, and there he sunk down exhausted, unconscious. And there he lay, he knew not how long, but the first thing of which he became conscious was of a fire raging within him. His head, too, it seemed, was being gradually crushed between iron jaws. He could not remember where he was. All was blinding confusion and torture. He tried to rise, but was helpless, and every effort only added fuel to the fire that was consuming him. He saw now and then a great cloud pass over him. He heard the sharp rustle of wings and the snarl and growl of a beast. And suddenly he saw a dark and impish thing hovering over him. He could feel the wind from its winnowing wings in his face. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the hovering vampire. As he did so, he felt something heavy alight upon his breast. He opened his eyes. A huge black bird, with a naked coral neck, was perched upon him. It was a vulture. A low cry escaped the youth's lips. The great bird quickly spread its somber wings and arose aloft in the air.

Then with a mighty effort Dick rose upon his elbow. As he did so, he heard the flapping of many wings. He looked around and saw a dozen vultures rising into the air and a snarling wolf go loping off into the bushes. Then within ten feet of him he saw a human form lying bloating in the sun and bearing the despoiling marks of wolf and vulture. Yet there was enough of the features of the dead left for Dare Devil Dick to recognize in them his late antagonist, the renegade.

With this discovery Dick's senses began to come back to him, and soon all became tolerably clear to his mind. The flying coach, the face of the maidens, the conflict on the vehicle, and the plunge into the river—all passed in quick succession through his brain, and it was with no little relief that he found his antagonist—who, strangely as it seemed, had crawled ashore at his side—was forever powerless to do him harm.

Dick finally rose to a sitting posture and passed his hand over his face to find it incrusted with blood. His hair, too, he found stiff with blood that had flowed from a wound on the head received in his fall from the coach. His brain was on fire, and there was a fearful burning within his whole frame. He was so weak from the loss of blood that he could not rise to his feet, but he managed to crawl down to the river where he slaked his thirst and bathed his brow—washed the blood from his face and head. This treatment greatly allayed his fever, and he began to feel stronger.

The vultures wheeled and circled high in the heavens and their companion of old, the skulking wolf, gibbered on the plain, loth to give up their feast.

Seated by the water's edge, Dick continued bathing his head.

Suddenly he was startled by a sound in the river above him. He turned his head and glanced up the stream. He saw a canoe standing on the waves. It contained a single occupant whom he recognized as Inez Bienville—one he had met in that vicinity before—always on the river in her boat—a strange, dark-eyed girl—a veritable water-nymph.

Raising his hand he beckoned the girl to approach, and the moment he did so, she dipped her paddle and sent her craft flying through the water toward him.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed as she drew near, "you are Dare Devil Dick!"

"Yes, what's left of me, my fair friend," replied the ranger.

"I am glad to find you alive," Inez said: "When I saw those telltale vultures in the air, I was almost afraid to advance. But I see the cause of their presence in that lifeless form lying there."

"Then you knew I had been hurt, Inez?"

"Yes, sir, I heard of your danger through those girls whose lives you endeavored to save."

"Are they alive? did they escape?"

"I rescued them from the sinking coach, and took care of them."

"You are an angel of mercy, Inez."

"No, I am but human, Dare Devil Dick, and have done nothing more than any woman would have done under like circumstances. I thank you for the compliment. But, sir, you are weak from your wounds; let me help you into my boat, and I will take you to a place of safety."

"I am only too glad to accept of your kindness," he replied, as he rose to his feet, and then, with the girl's assistance, stepped into the canoe and seated himself.

The next moment they were gliding up the river, and as they proceeded along Dick studied the face of the fair girl with a deep interest, wondering to himself who she really was, for, although he had met her several times in that vicinity—always in her boat on the river—he felt certain that there was some secret mystery connected with her life.

Before they had reached the entrance to the Hidden Home the shadows of night were gathering, but despite the darkness Inez found her way with perfect ease to the foot of the subterranean stairway.

A pull of the bell-rope soon brought down Old Ruth with a light when Dare Devil Dick was assisted up the steps and conducted into a room remote from that occupied by Zulima and Kitty. The place was lighted with a tallow dip. The walls around were hung with the skins of various animals that gave the place a novel and picturesque as well as comfortable appearance. The apartment was evidently a bedroom, for it contained nothing but a chair and a couch of furs and blankets.

Dick's wounds were carefully dressed and bandaged. Then a cup of tea, some broiled venison and warm bread was brought to him, and after he had partaken thereof he was surprised at how much stronger he felt in both body and mind.

"This is surely the home of the Good Samaritan," he finally remarked, as something of his old-time spirit revived; "I am very glad I found out where you live, Inez, for I have long been puzzled over the matter. Whose hidden home is this, anyhow?"

"Ours," the maiden replied, with a smile.

"I hope you are contented and happy," Dick replied, deigning not to notice her clever evasion. It was enough for him to know that he was under the care of so fair a being without prying into the guarded secrets of her life.

When she had seen the young ranger resting comfortably, Inez and Ruth bid him good-night and retired.

Dick threw himself on the couch and gave way to reflection. He wondered where his followers were, and how the struggle between them and the Indians had ended—if their failure to come in search of him was evidence of their defeat. He also pondered over the mystery surrounding the Hidden Home. He knew that Black Diablo had a secret retreat somewhere in the country, yet he always believed that it was in among the Hills up along the Blue Fourche. But could he have been mistaken in that? Was the dark-eyed Inez the daughter of the Spanish outlaw chief, Black Diablo? Was he in the secret retreat of Black Diablo?

He revolved these questions over and over in his mind, until he finally fell asleep. Then in his dreams he had many wild rides and fought over many of his old battles with Indian and outlaw, but amid these adventures and conflicts he was ever cheered on by the presence of a sweet, fair face—the face of Zulima Owens.

After leaving the ranger Inez visited her lady guests. She was received with expressions of joy and gladness.

"Well, girls, how have you passed the time?" she asked.

"Very nicely, indeed, Inez," Zulima replied. "To be sure we are uneasy and anxious about our friends and then we were a little frightened when just before sunset, we saw a hideous Indian standing on top of the opposite bluff looking this way."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Inez, betraying some uneasiness.

"Yes; but I know he did not see us, for the vines cover the window so effectually."

"But he may have discovered the river entrance, Zulima; but then I will not borrow any trouble—it comes to one without going after it," Inez said, in a philosophical way.

The three girls conversed together until late in the night, but never once did Inez allude to Dare Devil Dick, or the fact that he had been rescued.

Finally, when it came time for retiring, the young hostess bid her friends good-night and left the room.

Then Zulima and Kitty undressed themselves and laid down upon the couch and talked themselves to sleep.

When they awoke faint beams of light were shining in at the window. A new day had dawned, and rising, they dressed themselves. Old Ruth brought them water, a basin and towel. After they had arranged their toilet their breakfast was brought in by the negroess. They ate with a keen relish.

An hour or so after breakfast Inez made her appearance in the room, followed by a man whose head was bandaged and whose face was pale and haggard.

"Good-morning, girls," exclaimed Inez, greeting each with a kiss, then turning half around she said "Dare Devil Dick, allow me to introduce you to Zulima Owens and Kitty Lane."

A little cry of joyous surprise burst from the lips of the maidens, for, despite his pale face and bandaged head, they recognized the young ranger who had risked his life for them in the youth before them.

"I believe we have met before, ladies," said Dick, bowing politely.

"Yes," replied Zulima, her lips quiver with a strange emotion that welled up from her young heart, "and I am truly glad that we have been permitted to meet again, after passing through the ordeal we did. Your face tells me that you were wounded."

"Yes, indeed, and had it not been for our fair hostess I am afraid I should have perished—died on the river-bank."

"Then she rescued you, too?" said Zulima; "Inez, why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I wanted to surprise you," replied Inez, with a smile.

"You have succeeded, I assure you," declared Zulima.

"Indeed she has," affirmed Dick; "and now if I only knew my band was well and alive I could rest perfectly contented."

"And it is so with us regarding our friends," said

Zulima, "for we think we are perfectly secure here in the home of our Good Samaritan."

Thus the conversation ran on for some time between Zulima and Dick; and Inez, who was an interested as well as flattered listener, saw that a visible change had come over the spirits of the two young people since their meeting—a change that could only come from the recesses of the heart.

The two hours passed rapidly, pleasantly, and finally Old Ruth came in and said:

"If yer please, Missus Inez, dinner am ready."

"My friends," said Inez, rising, "I told Ruth to spread the table so that we could all dine together, so come, all of you."

She led the way followed by her guests into a long, spacious room lighted with tallow dips.

The table was set in the center of the apartment and was well filled with such food and wild fruit as the country afforded, including fresh fish done to a royal brown.

Seating themselves the little party began their repast, during which Dick kept up a pleasant conversation.

The meal was nearly finished when Old Ruth suddenly threw up her hands and with eyes staring wildly at some object of terror, cried out:

"Oh, Lor'! Missus Inez! look dar! look dar!"

"Ugh!" It was the grunt of a savage.

Instantly every eye turned in the direction whence the last sound came, when, to their terror and surprise, they beheld a *historically printed* Indian warrior standing in the doorway at the head of the stairs leading down to the river!

A cry burst from the lips of the terrified girls, but all the old-time courage of Dare Devil Dick quickly asserted itself. He drew from his pocket the revolver which Zulima had returned to him, and was ready to defend his and his friends' lives. But at this juncture the savage stepped aside into the room and another painted demon appeared in the doorway, and was followed by another and still another, until at least a score of the bloodthirsty wretches had entered and aligned themselves down the end and side of the room facing the wounded ranger and the speechless, terror-stricken women.

"Don't raise that pistol, youngster," warned the leader, who was a white man in disguise, "or you'll be hacked into fish-bait. Don't attempt to rise off that seat, sir, either, or you'll get yer head clipped open."

Dare Devil Dick sat motionless, clutching his revolver, with his burning eyes fixed upon the leering savages, whose consciousness of superior power and assured triumph had transformed them into smiling, gloating devils.

"Lord, warriors!" the renegade exclaimed, with a cunning, impudent grin at the terror-stricken girls, "this are a reg'lar den o' purty squaws, sure's my name's White Elk. But that's not enuff in sight. go 'round, but mebby we'll find some more chucked away somewhar he re. Come over here, birdie, and give me a kiss."

This last was addressed to Zulima; but quickly Dare Devil Dick, whom it seemed the foe had not yet recognized with his pale face and bandaged head, fixed his burning eyes on the renegade chief, and said:

"Don't you dare to touch that girl, or you die!"

"Whoo-eel!" exclaimed the renegade chief, with a sneer; "the young squaw-face talks like a warrior. But that quakin' wench there is more dangerous. There's no intimidation—no skeer here, boy, and you'll find it so if ye go to foolin' with us. We're not here for our health, but on business. What's behind that curtain?"

As he spoke, the renegade advanced along the end of the room, and lifting a curtain of cloth that extended lengthwise of the room, disclosed another apartment beyond, fully as large as the one they were in; but he saw nothing therein. Not satisfied, however, he took one of the candles and looked in again, but found only bare walls.

Replacing the light, he took his place at the head of the warriors, and said:

"Now, young man, I want to know whose ranch this is."

"I don't know," was the curt answer.

"Don't know, and one of its inmates? Youngster, see here; I'll give you two minutes to answer my question, and if you fail, I'll bore you right through and through."

"You have my answer," replied the undaunted youth, with flashing eye; "shoot, if you dare!"

"Ugh!" grunted a savage, addressing the chief, White Elk; "Ingin's eyes not good—me think that Dare Devil Dick," and the red skin trusted his finger out at the ranger.

"By my bones, I believe you're right. Fox-Eyes," responded the chief, closely scrutinizing the face of the boy. "Say, arn't ye Dare Devil Dick, in here for repairs? I'll give you jest sixty seconds to answer."

Before the youth could reply, in case he intended to do so at all, the cord supporting the curtain partition behind him was cut at each end by a knife in an unseen hand, and as the fabric dropped to the ground, the light fell upon the forms of a dozen or more armed men drawn up in line, with the giant scout, Dumb Hercules, standing at the head!

An exclamation involuntarily burst from the lips of the startled red-skins.

Dare Devil Dick glanced behind him at the men who had been so silently conjured up, as it seemed, from the darkness, and to his profound astonishment and joy saw that a dozen of his own brave followers stood at his back. And the moment he made this discovery, he turned to the renegade, White Elk, and said:

"Yes, villain, I am Dare Devil Dick!"

CHAPTER X.

THE HUNTERS HUNTED.

WHITE ELK and his savages were more surprised by the presence of Dumb Hercules and the rangers than had been Dick and the women by the sudden coming of the red-skins.

In speechless silence the two lines of foes stood glaring at each other like tigers at bay. In the hand of each savage was clutched a tomahawk. The right hand of each of the whites was held at his back, grasping a cocked revolver.

Dare Devil Dick soon took in the situation and measured the relative strength of each side. The odds were against him and his friends, but they held the advantage in that the low ceiling of the room would prevent a free use of the savages' tomahawks while the rangers could handle their revolvers with all their deadly skill.

Fifteen feet separated the two lines. Dick still sat at the table, half-way between.

The girls, white with terror, had risen and were huddling together in one end of the room—their eyes fixed, their lips quivering, and their forms trembling with convulsions of fear.

"A calm before the storm."

He looked straight at the renegade as he spoke. A sneer passed over the savage's face, and a low, guttural exclamation broke from the lips of his followers.

"It seems that this is a case of hunters being hunted," said one of the rangers; "but I'll swear, Dick, we're glad to see you alive again, for we'd been mourning you as a goner since we found your hat floating on the bosom of the Cheyenne—"

"See here," broke in White Elk, in a tone of forced courage, "you fellers can talk that over hereafter with the devil. Now, all I've got to say is for you to surrender."

A smile passed over the face of Dare Devil Dick, while the lips of Dumb Hercules were seen to curl with scorn.

"On what terms will you accept our surrender?" asked Dick, as he sat with his arms resting on the table, his revolver still in plain view of the foe.

"First, lay down your weapons," said the renegade.

"And then?"

"March out into that room."

"Well?"

"Then you can go your way."

"Very fair, indeed," replied Dare Devil Dick; "but now on what terms do you want to surrender to us?"

"Dare Devil Dick," snarled the renegade chief, "you can talk bold, but you cannot play the game of bluff. You are run to your hole, and you know it."

"On what terms, I say?" demanded the youth, emphasizing his words with a rap of his revolver—but on the table, "do you feel disposed to surrender to us?"

"We have no terms to make with an inferior foe," answered the renegade, betraying a little nervousness.

"We will give you just two minutes to surrender or leave this place," said the young ranger, in a tone with no uncertain meaning—that could not be misunderstood by the foe.

Inez started as Dick uttered the words. She saw that the storm was about to burst forth, and taking Zulima and Kitty by the arms drew them out into an adjacent room, saying:

"Oh, my dear young friends! a terrible fight is unavoidable, and I am doubtful of the result!"

As Dick spoke a convulsive shudder seemed to move the forms of the savages. Their eyes began to glitter with a more snakish glow, and their forms settled slightly, like crouching tigers preparing for the deadly spring.

One minute went by. Every man seemed to hear his own heart beating, so deep and painful was the silence and suspense.

Dare Devil Dick sat coolly toying with his revolver—a grim smile on his face, and his eyes fixed upon those of the chief.

Finally, when the two minutes were nearly up, White Elk broke the silence by saying:

"You dare not fire!"

Scarcely had the words fallen from his lips when Dare Devil Dick's revolver went off, as if by accident, and White Elk staggered forward, clutching at the table, then sunk down lifeless with a bullet-hole through his forehead.

Before the dull, pent-up roar of the ranger's weapon had reached the extremities of the Hidden Home, ten more revolvers rang out and half of the savage line melted down in death while yet their first war-cry hung upon their lips—ere they had struck a lick in their defense. Thus at one fell blow had the advantage been shifted from the savages to the rangers, but with the desperation of maddened demons, the red-skins rushed upon their foe.

Then followed a struggle unequalled in its fury. To get at the rangers the savages were compelled to cross the room. The table and chairs were between them, and in their advance these were overturned with a crash. The lights were put out, and in the darkness raged the battle. The crack of revolvers, the yell of the savages, the dull crash of falling bodies, the sudden blows of the heavy bludgeon in the hands of Dumb Hercules were all blended in one infernal din that fairly shook the great hill—echoing and rebounding back and forth from chamber to chamber—growing in intensity until it seemed the very cavern must be rent asunder by the pent-up roar.

But only for a moment did the struggle last.

Amid the darkness and the stifling fumes of sulphureous smoke that pervaded the room, the conflict ended as suddenly as it had begun.

A silence, broken only by the groans of the wounded and dying, succeeded the fury of the conflict.

A few moments later a light in the hand of Dumb Hercules appeared in the chamber of death, revealing a horrible and ghastly sight.

The rangers, or those who had not fallen, still stood in line with drawn revolvers, but not a single savage faced them, but lying upon the floor and across chairs, and piled upon each other lay three-fourths of the late exultant band of red-skins, dead, dying and wounded.

Two of the rangers lay dead with cloven heads, and two others were wounded quite seriously and a few slightly.

As soon as he realized that the victory was theirs, Dare Devil Dick, followed by Dumb Hercules, hurried into the room where the girls were seen to go. To their surprise, however, they found the maidens were not there. With a look of uneasiness upon his face Dumb Hercules led the way with a light from room to room of the Hidden Home in search of them. The silent man seemed familiar with the place, and Dick was led to believe that he had been there before, if he was not really its master.

In the last room they visited they found Old Ruth huddled in a corner shaking with terror.

"Oh, bress God!" she cried at sight of the giant and the boy, "you's not been killed, has you?"

"No, Ruth," replied Dick, "we whipped the Indians, and drove away those we did not kill. But, Ruth, where are the girls? Do you know?"

"Done gone to de Cave ob Refuge."

"The Cave of—" began the young ranger, but here Dumb Hercules plucked him aside and motioning him to follow, led the way from the room. They were absent perhaps twenty minutes when they returned pale and excited.

"Men!" cried Dare Devil Dick, "our victory has got to be won again. More desperate work than ever is before us. The three girls that were in this room just before the fight commenced fled in terror from this cavern, and endeavoring to gain another, were captured by a band of savages and outlaws waiting without, and are now being borne away into captivity that will be far worse than death. Boys, I am ready for the saddle!"

"And we are ready to follow!" shouted one of the rangers, whose words were taken up and repeated by each and all.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SILENT HORSEMAN.

So terrified was Inez Bienville and her two fair guests, Zulima and Kitty, by the awful din of the conflict between the savages and the rangers, that death seemed inevitable to all should they remain in the cavern, and turning to her friends, Inez said:

"Girls, come, let us flee to the Cave of Refuge, another cave on the opposite side of the river! It will be death to stay here!"

Without reply, Zulima and Kitty followed her. She led the way out of the room and down the stairs to where she found, to her surprise, three canoes lying in the water. One of these was her own, but the other two—heavy, cumbersome crafts—she knew at a glance belonged to the savages who had invaded the Hidden Home.

The three boats lay side by side, the bark canoe the furthest away. Stepping across from one to the other, Inez reached her own boat, and had just seated herself, when a rush of feet was heard coming down the steps. The next moment the form of a fleeing savage leaped across the two boats and landed in hers, rocking it so violently as to almost throw her overboard. Before she could regain her seat, the paddle was jerked from her hand, and the boat sent gliding out into the river.

A cry burst from the girl's lips, for she saw she was a captive in the power of a hideous savage. She rose to her feet, and would have leaped overboard had the savage not seized her and pulled her down with brutal violence.

The savage pulled rapidly down the stream. They had gone but a short distance, when Inez beheld one of the other boats glide from the cavern, containing three savages, in whose power were Zulima and Kitty.

That the enemy had been victorious in the conflict Inez had not a doubt. She never dreamed that she was in the power of one of the few red-skins that had escaped from the deadly conflict in the cavern, else her heart would not have sunk hopeless and desponding in her breast.

The savages with Zulima and Kitty turned up the stream, and soon disappeared from sight.

Inez's captor put ashore a short distance below the Hidden Home and on the bank they were met by a white man whose face was all aglow with triumph and admiration.

"Bully for our side, red-skin!" he exclaimed, as he glared upon Inez with a repulsive smile, "the presence of that lovely captive tells me you were victorious."

"Waugh!" ejaculated the Indian excitedly; "Injins nearly all git killed—revolvers of pale-face too many—Silent Death there—so Dare Devil Dick, and his braves—White Elk killed—all kill'd but three—four—we flee—run on white girl in boat—bring her captive—no stay here long—rangers come!"

While this news revived Inez's hopes it struck fear to the heart of the outlaw, who, turning, said:

"Hawk-Nose, hurry along the captive, and let us mount and rattle out for the hills."

Inez was conducted over a ridge of wooded bluffs into a little valley, where an Indian warrior was in charge of six horses. She was at once given to understand that she must ride on one of the horses, and that if she refused, she would be tied in the saddle. Rather than suffer such treatment she quietly submitted to her fate, and allowed the outlaw to assist

her into the saddle of White Elk, who was no longer in need of it.

Then the renegade and the two savages mounted their horses, and with their captive and two riderless horses, set off at a gallop toward the west.

The Indian who had captured Inez, and the renegade, talked as they rode along about the secret cavern, the surprise that they had met there, and their bloody defeat. Inez, however, had not a doubt but that some of her friends had fallen in the conflict, and the faces that came up in her mind, as probably lying cold in death, where those of Dumb Hercules and Dare Devil Dick, whom she knew to be especial objects of savage hatred and vengeance.

For several hours the four rode briskly onward at a steady gait. Their way lay over a rather broken and uneven stretch of prairie, dotted here and there with perfect forests of sage brush, and now and then a *motte* of scrubby timber. Finally, as they raised the brow of a little knoll, one of the savages uttered a low ejaculation and pointed off to the left, where, at the distance of half a mile, a horseman was in view.

"Whoa!" exclaimed the renegade as he drew rein, his eyes fixed upon the horseman; "as true as my name's Wolf-Face Bill, that's that Silent Horseman that the boys hev been chasin' all day."

Inez took the horseman in question for an Indian. His form was enveloped in a red blanket, and his head was bare. His horse was walking round and round in a circle of small compass, as though its reins were fast to something.

"Who Silent Horseman?" asked an Indian.

"It's Old Niobrara Jack, the gentleman that's guidin' the Owens train to its destination. He's a stiff, now, as he ventured too far from camp, and I put up a job on him."

True enough, this outlaw and renegade call'n him self Wolf-Face Bill—and there was an appropriateness in the name—was the man who had slain Old Jack, Colonel Owens's guide. But not satisfied with this, the body was taken, placed in the saddle on his own horse, and there securely propped and tied in a bolt-upright position. Then, to conceal the ropes and thongs that bound the corpse—as if to make the spectacle all the more ghastly and horrible—a blanket was wrapped around the lifeless form, and the horse turned loose to wander back to camp. It was the ghoulish trick of a being in whose breast every sense of humanity was dead. But a day or so after the death of the guide, it became rumored among the outlaws and Indians that Niobrara Jack possessed the most remarkable horse for speed and endurance on the plains of Dakota. This made one and all desirous of possessing the animal, and it had been chased for hours at different times by Indians and outlaws, with its silent rider upon its back, but so far had eluded capture.

"Hawk-Nose," said Wolf-Face Bill. "I believe that hoss's reins have catched and twisted round a sage-brush the way he acts, and if you'll go over there cautiously and easy, you may git the fastest hoss that ever boxed sod in the Felle Fourche valley."

"Me go," said the Indian, slipping from the back of his horse.

"Lead the hoss up here with his rider if ye catch him," said Wolf-Face; "but I reckon the old euss is sp'lin' afore this time, for he's been 'ead now two days."

Inez's heart grew sick at this revolting talk. It told her how merciless and brutal was the wretch into whose power the Indian had surrendered her.

Hawk-Nose started off on foot toward the Silent Horseman. Wolf-Face watched him with the deepest anxiety, and when he saw him approach and secure the horse, he exclaimed:

"Bully for Hawk-Nose! he's got the hoss and the old stiff."

True enough, the savage had secured the horse with little difficulty, for he found the rein had caught on a sage-brush, and the animal walking around had twisted it fast. The face of the silent rider was bent downward, the chin touching the breast. The mouth was partly open, the eyes closed. The long, disheveled hair was tumbled about the head and face in wild disorder.

Leading the animal the savage started toward his friends. As he approached them, Wolf-Face remarked:

"He sets up purty squar' for a dead cuss—ain't bloated a bit, either. Reckon he's dryin' up into a mummy!"

Inez could not see the face of the silent rider, it hung so low on his breast. His hands and arms, as well as his entire body, were enveloped in the blanket around him.

Within ten feet of the three the Indian came to a halt with the ghastly rider and his trembling, terrified horse.

Wolf-Face rode alongside the silent man, and was in the act of pulling the drooping head upright when the blanket that enveloped his form was suddenly thrown back, the head of the Silent Horseman was lifted, his hands were extended—each clutching a revolver, and before any one had time for a thought the weapons were discharged, one into the face of the outlaw, another into the face of the savage on foot, and with yells of mortal agony both outlaw and red-skin fell dead. Then before the third savage could act there was another report, and he fell from his horse shot through the heart.

So quick was all this done that Inez's confused mind could scarcely comprehend the situation, and before she could utter a word the supposed lifeless horseman exclaimed:

"There, you're safe, my gal! I'm Skylark Sam, Border Detective and scout."

"Oh, sir!" cried the girl, "they said you were dead—that you were Old Niobrara Jack."

"That's where they war mistaken, we'ren't they? Do you think I'm a dead man? Do I look as silent and corpse-like as I did? I'll admit this is poor Old Niobrara's horse. I caught the animal, took the dead man from its back, and gave him the best burial I could. When I see'd the three demons hurrying off with you a captive, I mounted this critter and by a roundabout way got in ahead of you, put the blanket 'round me, fastened the hoss in a way they'd think war accidental, then tied myself in a way that'd fool 'em, and come dead on 'em in royal style. I knew they war hankerin' arter this hoss, and would go out o' the way to git him. Wal, the trap worked like things in a story-book, and here we are. As I said before, I'm Skylark Sam; who are you, little one?"

"My name is Inez Bienville."

"Inez Bienville," repeated the detective, reflectively; "by Jos! I don't know but what I want to have a little chat with you, Inez, but as I see a band o' mounted Ingins comin' down the valley we'd better put it off and canter along if you feel safe to trust me."

"Trust you? Sir, you have saved my life at the risk of your own," said the maiden, "and I am not afraid to trust myself in your care."

"Then let us be moving."

Side by side the two rode away toward the west.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TOILS OF BLACK DIABLO.

To dress the wounds of the two rangers who were left in the care of Old Ruth in the Hidden Home, to bury the two that had fallen in the conflict, and remove the dead savages from the cavern, occupied all of two hours, when Dare Devil Dick and his rangers, accompanied by Dumb Hercules, left the cavern by a secret passage—the same by which they had entered—leading out on the side of the bluff, and set out in pursuit of the savages.

First, however, they proceeded to a wooded hill about a mile distant, wherein Dumb Hercules and the rangers had left Colonel Owens, John Lane and a number of the rangers in charge of the horses belonging to the party.

The presence of Dare Devil Dick was hailed with shouts of joy by those in the grove, for to them, like those that had met him in the cavern, his coming was like one from the grave.

To the two distracted fathers Dick broke the news of the girl's capture by the savages, notwithstanding their great victory over the band of White Elk; and while they were rejoiced to know their children were alive, they thought perhaps that it might be better were they dead than in the power of the savages.

The fall of four more of Dare Devil Dick's followers left four more empty saddles, but the courage of the band never faltered, and now that their leader was restored to them, they registered a solemn vow to avenge their fallen comrades.

Dick was rejoiced to learn that his horse had been recovered by his friends and was at hand, and in a few minutes he was once more in the saddle, leading the pursuit of the red-skins.

No amount of persuasion could induce Dumb Hercules to ride, but acting as guide he moved along on foot with rapid strides, his head erect and his keen, rest eyes ever on the alert.

"That giant is a strange man, colonel," said Dare Devil Dick, as side by side the two rode along.

"Yes, back of his relentless war on the red-skin and outlaw," replied the colonel, "is a deep, dark secret that has made him what he is, a silent, avenging Nemesis."

"Then you have no doubt but that the secret retreat in the river bluff is his home?"

"None whatever, Dick, else he could have known nothing of the secret passages leading to the place whither he had seen White Elk and his band going."

"Then who can be the girl that saved your daughter and her friend, Inez Bienville? Surely not his daughter?"

"I do not know—I have been unable to find out much about him, more than that he is a host in a fight. Then there is another fellow—Skylark Sam—"

"The Border Detective!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, the same. Do you know him?"

"I do."

"Well, he's another enigma—I believe all these bordermen are mysterious fellows," and the colonel glanced at the Boy Ranger with a smile; "Sam came to our camp, and after rendering us some gallant service—in fact thwarted a cunning devil from spiking our cannon—he departed in a silent and unknown manner, and we haven't heard from him since."

"He'll turn up somewhere, colonel," replied Dick. "A border detective does a great deal of mysterious work and little talking."

Thus the two conversed as they rode along.

The trail of the savages was broad and deep, and although they had some three hours the start, the pursuers came in sight of them just before night-fall.

Not until it was so dark that the trail could not be seen did the party come to a halt for the night. On leaving the immigrant camp on the Cheyenne they had taken supplies sufficient for several days' needs, and having lariated their animals out to grass, they ate their supper within the shadows of a clump of trees—fearing to strike a light lest it guide the foe to their bivouac.

Early the next morning they were in their saddles and away on the trail. They had entertained high hopes of overtaking the foe that day before they reached the fastnesses of the Black Hills, but in this they were disappointed, for the Indians had im-

proved their advantages by traveling most of the night.

The savages were headed for the village of Sitting Bull, and unless overtaken before they reached that stronghold the rescue of the captives would be beyond the power of the little band of pursuers.

But Dare Devil Dick and Dumb Hercules were not the men to falter in the face of a single obstacle, and they urged all forward in hopes that extra speed would overcome the advantage of the foe's night traveling.

Finally the foot-hills were reached, where extra precaution must be observed to avoid dangers in ambush and it was here that the skill of Dumb Hercules as a scout and trailer was shown to its best advantage. Moving on in advance of the horsemen, the tireless giant watched the trail closely, and after journeying perhaps twenty miles further, his worst fears were realized in that the trail divided—the greater force going on westward and the smaller entering a path leading northwest.

A halt was made and a consultation held.

From his knowledge of the topography of the hills, Dumb Hercules did not think the two parties would come together unless they did so within a few miles.

It was suggested that the pursuers divide their force and each party be followed, but this the Silent Scout strenuously opposed. He thought the division of the enemy's force might be a trick to divide the force of the pursuers, and then by a sudden concentration of their numbers fall upon the divided rangers and crush them with overwhelming odds.

The giant, however, concluded to follow the smaller party a short distance alone, and if he saw that it passed beyond the point where it was possible for it to swing around and rejoin the main body, he would strike across the dividing ridge and meet his friends at a certain point some miles up the pass.

With this understanding they separated, the Dumb Scout moving rapidly away up the narrow defile, while the rangers rode on westward, deploying two of their number in advance as scouts.

Dumb Hercules had followed his trail perhaps two miles when he saw that the horse-tracks began to separate. This aroused his suspicions, and he drew an arrow from his quiver and carried it in his hand alongside his great bow.

As he advanced the defile gradually widened and the bluffs on either side became taller and more precipitous. Clumps of trees and thickets of shrubbery grew along the base of the bluffs, and suddenly from one of these on the right a voice called out:

"Halt, there!"

The giant stopped, and as he fixed his arrow in the bow glanced in the direction whence that peremptory command had come. But he saw no one.

"Surrender, Sir Scout, or you're a dead man!"

This came from up the defile, and at the same moment three armed men with rifles at a trail appeared from behind a rock and advanced upon the scout.

This advance upon him was instantly followed by a horseman on the left who dashed from the shadows of some trees with a coiled lasso in his hand.

Hercules saw that with all his precaution he had walked into a trap of the enemy, but determined to sell his life dearly he raised his great bow and sent an arrow tearing through the breast of one of the three outlaws on foot. But at the same instant the noose of a lasso in the hand of the horseman fell about the scout's form, pinioning his arms to his side and throwing him violently to the earth.

Then from the bushes another man appeared, and running up to the fallen, struggling scout, threw the slip-noose of another rope around his neck and drew it taut, choking the giant until he grew black in the face and almost helpless.

The next moment the shout of a dozen outlaws and Indians rang through the defile, as together the triumphant villains rushed from their concealment and gathered around the giant.

By the time Dumb Hercules had recovered from his choking he was so securely bound that he could scarcely move a finger. And to make assurance doubly sure the slip-noose had been left hanging about his neck to be used in case he should slip or break his bonds, or otherwise attempt to escape.

"The trap worked like a charm and although we didn't catch as many as we'd expected, caramba! we got the biggest Roman of them all."

Thus spoke the man who had thrown the lasso with such skill. Dumb Hercules started at sound of his voice as though it had been the hissing "skirr" of a serpent. He glanced up at the man who sat in his saddle holding the end of the rope encircling his neck. He was a dark-faced, sinister-looking wretch of perhaps forty years of age whose features told that he was a Spaniard. In fact, Dumb Hercules recognized him as the outlaw, Black Diablo, whose name had been synonymous with outlawry and crime from Old Mexico to the head-waters of the Missouri.

At sight of the villain's brutal face Dumb Hercules's very soul seemed to become inflamed, and to conceal his emotion—to keep down the rising demon within him, he turned his gaze from the outlaw chief.

"He blushes at sight of you, captain," said one of the outlaws.

"Ay, senor" replied the Spaniard, "you will see him blush again before we are through with him. Those tell-tale arrows of his found in the breasts of so many of our men, fixes upon him a crime that deserves punishment by as many deaths as he has slain friends of ours."

"Then you're not goin' to string him up here for the buzzards to pick?" observed a little, ferret-eyed villain.

"No, indeed; we will march him to head-quarters

and let him try his skill in the 'bear-pit,'" replied Black Diablo.

"Bravo! bravo!" shouted his followers.

"So, fall in, men, and we'll be off—forward, march!"

And with this the band set off up the defile with their Silent Captive, who little dreamed of the fate to which he had been doomed.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LEAP OF A THOUSAND FEET!

A LITHE, agile figure, clad in a suit of buckskin—half-savage and half-white—was gliding stealthily along a mountain side, dodging from bush to rock and rock to bush like a fox, pausing ever and anon to watch the movements of a band of mounted savages coming up the pass below, having in their power two female captives.

The figure was that of a white man, with short, iron-gray hair, and a regular hazel thicket of stubby beard covering his face to his very eyes. Under his arm he carried a long object resembling a huge umbrella folded. He carried no weapons that were visible, unless that object was one.

With the rapidity of a hunted deer he kept on and on before the red-skins, yet keeping out of sight of the lynx-eyed savages.

There were forty or fifty of the latter, who were evidently making for their village in a little, park-like valley back in the great hills. They were evidently a war-party returning from battle, but the number of riderless horses in their midst told of a fearful loss of friends.

For hours they rode slowly on through the dark defile, while in advance all the while the figure on the mountain-side glided—never losing sight of them.

Finally the Indians halt, and some of them dismount. They appeared to hold a council of war; then the two captive girls are taken from their saddles, when six warriors on foot begin to climb the rugged hillside taking the captives with them.

"Ha! ha!" exclaims the strange scout on the heights above; "I see they're gittin' uneasy for fear they'll lose their captives, and are going to send them cross-roads to old Sittin' Bull's dog-town. Oh, by the great Zeladeel! if there war three or four more of me, I'd light onto them six valiants like a cyclone. But now, I'm at the end of my lariat—Hullo! the others are movin'!"

The mounted savages moved on up the pass. The scout remained in concealment until they had passed by opposite him.

For a moment he was in a brown study as to what he should do—follow the band or the six with the captives. In either case what could be done, lone-handed as he was?

While this matter was being considered, he saw the savages come to a halt again. He saw most of them dismount. Those that did not, rode on taking all the horses with them, while the others dispersed into the shadows of the bushes and rocks along either side of the pass.

"Oho!" exclaimed the watcher, "that means an ambush, by the b'ody Saracens! But who's to be the victims? Can it be the friends of them pals that are in pursuit? I'll take a peepish while I can operate myself, if necessary, and nip their little game in the bud."

So saying, he moved on until he gained a point where the mountain-side had suddenly become a perpendicular cliff, a thousand or more feet in height. From there he could command a view of the pass for a mile below, and secreting himself, he resolved to wait and watch.

Between him and the edge of the cliff a narrow path ran, and he had been in concealment but a few moments when he heard something coming around the point of rocks below. Supposing it was a goat he gave it no further thought. At the same time he discovered a party of horsemen coming into view down the valley. Feeling satisfied that they were the object of the Indian ambush above, he stepped from his concealment with the intention of giving them the signal of danger. As he did so he found himself face to face with six Indians approaching along the narrow path, who had in custody the two female captives, Zulima Owens and Kitty Lane!

The man started slightly at sight of them, but recovering his composure with remarkable presence of mind, he said:

"Ho, my brothers! I greet you with joy!"

An exclamation of surprise burst from the red-skins' lips, and their hands mechanically sought their girdles.

"Who you, pale-face?" one of them asked.

"I am the Hermit of the Hills," replied the man; "the friend of the Sioux. I carry no gun—no knife—no tomahawk. My home is in the hills—in the valleys—everywhere."

"What that?" asked the Indian, pointing to the long object under the hermit's arm.

"That is my folding lodge—my tepee," replied the man, edging around between the Indians and the edge of the precipice, close to the captives; "when night comes and the stars weep—when the rain falls, this is my roof—my shelter—my tepee. See, it opens that way," and he opened the object as one opens an umbrella, "and then I stick this end into the ground, or a crevice in the rock, and lo! I have a shelter."

The Indians regarded the contrivance with fear and suspicion.

It was on the principle of a huge umbrella, with a long, stout handle of light, tough wood. It was covered with canvas and strongly braced and guyed with ropes and cords reaching from the ends of the steel ribs to the lower end of the handle. A sort of stirrup was attached to the bottom of the staff, and a hand-hold up toward the top. Altogether it was,

to the Indians, and the captives, too, in fact, an odd and singular contrivance for a portable hand-tent, as it were.

One of the Indians regarded it curiously for several moments after the hermit had explained its advantages, then looking the operator square in the eyes, he said:

"Waugh! me believe you bad man—lie—Skylark Sam!"

"The deuce you do!" quickly replied the unsaintly hermit; then, as he pointed down the valley, he asked: "Who are them fellers coming there?"

Every eye was instantly turned down the valley except those of the hermit, who, taking advantage of the diversion, touched Kitty Lane on the arm in a significant manner. But his movement did not escape the eye of one of the savages, who grasped his tomahawk and started toward the hermit. But, quick as a thought almost, the latter threw his left arm about the slender form of Kitty, and with his feet in the stirrup of his *tepee* (?) he staggered backward and leap'd over the edge of the cliff and shot downward with a rush into the black depths a thousand feet below!

A wild scream of terror from Kitty's lips went trailing down, down into the black gorge, and was echoed and re-echoed in piercing shrieks among the rocks.

With a cry Zulima rushed toward the edge of the precipice—drawn there by the irresistible fascination of terror—and but for the quick movement of a savage la arresting her, would have thrown herself over the ledge.

In fear and excitement the Indians now hurried their remaining captive away, believing that the hermit and the girl had been crushed into lifeless pulp below.

But, in this never had red-skins been worse deceived, for the hermit, true enough, was the redoubtable Skylark Sam in disguise, but whose voice, heard a few evenings previous, when he descended from the balloon on the plain, came so near exposing him; and the "umbrella" he used was his own ingenious invention, an improvement in buoyant power over the old-fashioned *parachute* of the aeronaut.

Being himself light, the old detective had selected the lightest of the two captives to take with him in his fearful leap. But he had made hundreds of such leaps and knew exactly the buoyant power of his wonderful *parachute*, and with the maiden in his arms he descended rapidly, yet safely, into the pass, landing among some low bushes that broke the force of the descent.

Kitty was almost helpless, paralyzed with terror, when they reached the ground, but extricating himself from the "harness" of his collapsed machine, the daring old scout said, as he tore the wig of bristling beard from his face:

"Gal, brace up—don't faint—you're safe—I'm old Skylark Sam, the detective, an' winged bird o' Paradise. Cheer up, gal, here comes a hull band o' rangers—listen! hear their ho-ses' boofs? By the mother o' Adam! it's Dare Devil Dick and his rangers!"

"Oh, sir!" Kitty exclaimed, looking around her in a sort of a bewilderment, "are you sure they are not Indians?"

"Look for yourself, my little lady," said the old scout.

Kitty turned her eyes and saw the horsemen approaching but a few rods away. Foremost among them she saw Dare Devil Dick and Colonel Owens; and then her father rode into sight, and with a cry of joy she sprung to her feet and ran eagerly to meet him.

Bitter indeed was the disappointment of Colonel Owens when he learned that his child was still a captive.

Skylark Sam gave an account of his movements which proved entirely satisfactory to the party, and when the old fellow had narrated his adventure as the Silent Horseman in rescuing Inez, he was applauded with ringing shouts.

"Where is she now, Sam?" asked Dare Devil Dick.

"Tucked away down among the hills whar Ingins or outlaw won't find her. I left her behind in lopes or that by figurin' round I might rescue the other two gals; but I could only git one o' them."

"You did nobly, Skylark," said Colonel Owens; "we saw you leap from that cliff, and Dick said it was Skylark Sam and his umbrella, but I could scarcely believe that such a thing were possible. But say, Sam, have you seen anything of Dumb Hercules?"

"Notin', colonel," replied the old scout; "but I see'd thirty or forty Ingins go into ambush up the pass to wait your coming."

"Ayl! we have been expecting such dangers all along," said Dick, "but will be able now to thwart the designs of the red devils."

Kitty told the story of her and her friend's capture in attempting to escape to the Cave of Refuge. But she did not learn the savages' object in sending them on foot through the hills in the way they did, as their conversation was altogether in the Sioux dialect.

The red-skins, she said, had known of their being pursued from the start, and while the outlaws were with them she overheard enough among the white villains to satisfy her that the rangers were to be surprised somewhere in the mountains. She said that Black Diablo had expressed himself in the bitterest and most revengeful language against Dumb Hercules.

"Then, if Dumb Hercules was captured by Black Diablo, there will be little hope of his ever escaping alive," said Colonel Owens.

"Yes; he is even in more danger than if he were in the Indians' hands," declared Old Skylark Sam;

"but I say, boys, if them Ingins don't go back to the main party in the pass that's got the other girl, two or three o' us well armed might follow up and reduce the Si-ox population bout six and rescue the captive."

"I am ready to go, for one," declared the impatient, disconsolate father, Colonel Owens.

"Colonel," said Dare Devil Dick, "let me send two of my men with Skylark Sam, in your stead. They are younger, and born Indian-trailers and fighters."

"Very well, Dick; you are doubtless right. May God speed them!"

The tree at once departed on their dangerous mission, and then the others with Kitty fell back down the pass, dismounted and took up a position for the warm reception of the savages should they make an advance.

Half an hour later an Indian scout was seen skulking on the cliff high above them. Dare Devil Dick turned to one of his followers and said:

"Sure Shot, can't you try your skill on that fellow?"

Taking up his Winchester, the ranger, who was noted for his accuracy in measuring distances with the eye, made a careful calculation of the intervening space, then adjusting his sights, he rested his gun on a rock, and taking a careful aim, fired.

His friends watched the shot in breathless suspense, and, to their wonder, they saw the savage straighten up, run down the hillside a few steps, throw up his hands and plunge headlong down the bluff.

"A fine shot, my boy," complimented the colonel; "a wonderful shot, sir."

From that time on not another red-skin was seen during that day, and it was evident that the ambushed warriors, having no desire to meet the rangers in a fair field, had retired.

It was nearly sunset when Skylark Sam and the two rangers returned with the bitter intelligence that the six savages with Zulima had reached the village of Sitting Bull.

With this news all hope died in the breast of Colonel Owens.

"Don't give up, Colonel Owens," said Skylark Sam. "I've never yet met with a case that I could not work all right some way or other; and I already have my pla's fixed for the rescue o' your darter, and I'll bet any man a chaw tobakker, or a deed on a patch o' blue sky, that I win."

CHAPTER XIV.

DUMB HERCULES IN THE BEAR PIT.

But a short distance from the village of Sitting Bull, in a cavern in the mountain-side, was the retreat of Black Diablo, the Spanish outlaw chief, who for the past few years had terrorized the mining districts of the Black Hills, and the stage companies and settlers of western Dakota and northern Nebraska. His band had been permitted to grow and flourish under the very shadow of the military posts, and so well had they been organized and so perfect was their system, and numerous their spies, that whenever any move was made against them by the troops, they dispersed among the mountains and thereby eluded capture. The worst enemies, or rather those that had inflicted the worst punishment on the outlaws, were the rangers, and Dumb Hercules; and the latter, when he found himself a prisoner in the outlaws' power, expected nothing at their hands but death.

At the heels of the outlaws' horses the prisoner was hurried away, and about nightfall they reached Black Diablo's stronghold, where he was placed under a strong guard.

Then Black Diablo dispatched a messenger to the Indian village, a mile away, inviting the chief, Sitting Bull, and all his friends to come over into the valley and see Dumb Hercules, the Silent Slayer, put to the torture in the Bear Pit, as the place for execution of captives was called.

The outlaw chief and those of his men who had lived to return from the disastrous campaign against Colonel Owens's train, regaled themselves on liquor and such food as the ranch afforded. After these came pipes and a general recapitulation of the events of the past few days. Black Diablo was in no amiable mood.

"I would not feel so blue and disgusted," the outlaw leader finally said, "had we succeeded in saving our three captive girls. But with all our cost of life we return with just one female captive and Old Silent Tongue. And what is worse the girl is in the Indian village, and Standing Bear will undoubtedly claim her while we will be left with Dumb Hercules to amuse us a few minutes and then all will be over. Still there will be some consolation to me if the Indians succeed in entrapping Dare Devil Dick. Caramba! that Cheyenne trip was a cursed fail... everything considered!"

"How did it come about, captain?" asked an outlaw who had remained at home to guard the place.

"Well, you see we depended on our girl spy who was with Owens's train," replied the outlaw chief; "we sent our scout to meet her near Redwood Grove, and his body was found afterward pierced through with an arrow—the work of Dumb Hercules, curse him! But notwithstanding this failure, Standing Bear attacked the train and got badly wounded. The immigrants had a cannon with which they mowed the red warriors. Then we put up a job to spike the canon. Karl Frone was sent into the camp to personate Skylark Sam whom we supposed was up the Belle Fourche. He was to spike the canon and fire a pistol as a signal for the attack. We waited some three hours, and then hearing a pistol fired made a night attack and, by heavens! that cannon went off again. Karl Frone's work had been a failure, and I guess Karl was killed, for he has not

been heard of since. So was Mark Tahly, and what his poor girl will do now, I can't say. But that man Skylark Sam, is a man to be feared more, or as much, at least, as any that we have had to contend with, and if he gets the right kind of backing we may look out for trouble. Really, boys, that fellow was the sole cause of my quitting Western Texas, and while I have no fears in particular of him, now, I am thinking the climate in Montana will be more healthy for us. They say the stage business and gold mining are having a run there with no one levying and collecting a cent of toll. But, boys, night is approaching and we will want a score or two pine torches prepared for the entertainment."

Darkness finally gathered in the valley.

Standing Bear and fully a hundred of his friends came over from the village. Sitting Bull declined to attend.

A huge bonfire up the narrow defile marked the location of what had been termed the Bear Pit.

Dumb Hercules was finally brought from the cavern and conducted by outlaws bearing torches up the pass.

Coming to where a high stone wall built with mechanical skill across the defile disputed their passage they turned to the right and clambered up an acclivity on the broad and level summit of which burned the bonfire. Here they stopped. Dumb Hercules glanced around him. Twenty feet above the first wall he saw another built across the pass which, with the two sides of the canyon inclosed a space of about twenty by thirty feet. The lowest wall was all of fifteen in height, while the one opposite of where he stood rose to the height of over a hundred feet. At the bottom of the latter he could see the mouth of a cavern that ran back into the bluff, and from the darkness of this hole he beheld a pair of glowing eyes, set in a dark hairy face, glaring out at the gathering throng. The Silent Scout, also, discovered, lying in the bottom of the stone-walled pen, that which caused a shudder to pass through his frame. It was a human skeleton.

"In that pit, Sir Hercules," said Black Diablo, pointing down into the pen, "you will have a grand opportunity to display your fighting qualities and splendid strength. Those whose skeletons you see over yonder and down hero failed to save their lives and secure their liberty, but you have advantages they had not in your great physical powers."

Dumb Hercules in his affliction could make no reply to these brutal remarks in which were, as a blind, couched terms of mercy. But the giant knew there was no mercy in the heart of Black Diablo. He knew that the Spaniard's love of the "bull-fight" was inherent, and that even in his outlawry he was indulging himself and friends in his national sport there in that mountain defile, though in a far more brutal and savage way than was the wont of the Spanish code.

By means of ropes the giant scut was lowered into the pit at a point where an angle of rocks concealed the mouth of the cave from view. A nimble young outlaw then slipped down another rope, cut the cords of the prisoner, when Dumb Hercules again stood free of bonds.

"Now, Sir Hercules," again exclaimed the outlaw chief, "stand on your guard. Your reputation as a fighter is in the balance. Pascal"—addressing a friend—"throw a brand over there into the mouth of the cave and stir up them loutish animals."

A firebrand was tossed into the mouth of the cave.

Instantly two huge brown bears—a male and a female—followed by two half-grown cubs, emerged from their retreat, stopped and looked around them and then up at the jostling throng on the walls as though dazzled by the glare of the torches.

Dumb Hercules glanced at the animals with a look of indifference, then he ran his eyes around the pit as if mentally calculating his chances. But the ghastly skeletons and the strong, grim walls as seen in the garish, flickering light of the torches banished all hope from his breast; still he allowed no look or movement to betray his inward feelings.

The outlaws and red-skins crowded and jostled each other on the walls—eagerly, anxiously—their eyes flaring like wild beasts and their faces wearing the look of demoniac curiosity.

Still Dumb Hercules stood motionless. The bears seemed loth to begin the attack.

"Prod up them bears, Kirk," Black Diablo finally said; "they seem stupid and sluggish."

The outlaw addressed, fixed an arrow to a bow brought there for the purpose, and sent the sharp weapon into the female bear's haunches. With a fierce howl of pain the bear instantly doubled herself around and snapped at the rankling barb, then with a furious growl she lunged across the pit at the Silent Scout.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GIANT'S GREAT FEAT.

A YELL now rose from Indian and outlaw lips. The hills and canyons took up the sound and sent it echoing and rebounding through the night.

Dumb Hercules placed himself on the defense as the bear advanced, and when near enough he dealt her a furious kick in the side that almost doubled her up; but in a moment the beast had recovered from the blow, and with a growl of anger rose upon her haunches. Scarcely had she done so, however, ere the Silent Scout dealt her a blow on the head with his great fist that sent her rolling over on the earth.

A shout of applause burst from the lips of the spectators.

The big bear came to the assistance of his mate. Dumb Hercules sprung back to elude him.

The now fully enraged female scrambled to her feet and charged upon her foe, only to receive another blow that knocked her over. When she arose

again blood was streaming from her mouth and one of her eyeballs hung from the socket.

The two cubs had fled to the cave in alarm.

The male finally came up with the nimble-footed giant, when he, too, received a blow that brought him half down; but rising again with a growl the bear struck the giant with his paw on the breast stripping the clothes from his body to the waist and bringing the great man to his knees.

The excitement of the spectators now became wild and frenzied. It seemed the contest in the pit was approaching a crisis. The outlaws and savages crowded forward eager for a better view. A score or more of them were already hanging on the very edge of the pit.

Rising quickly to his feet, Dumb Hercules dealt the bear another furious blow with his mighty fist that staggered them both. At this juncture the female, with bloody froth streaming from her mouth, rushed in between the combatants and attempted to seize the scout, but eluding her grasp the giant gave her another kick that for several moments deprived her of breath.

This round of the combatants was hailed with a ringing shout of applause from above, but at the same instant almost a wild shriek rang out on the edge of the pit, and a young Indian was seen to fall into the bear-pen. He had lost his balance—being crowded so hard by those behind—and fell. But he was little hurt, and springing to his feet, somewhat confused, he darted across the pen. He ran between Hercules and the bears, and with a fierce growl the beasts turned upon him.

This gave Hercules a momentary breathing-spell. He stood back against the wall, his eye following the Indian and the bears.

Wild indeed now was the excitement above. The tone of the spectators had changed.

The Indian was a young warrior, active and graceful as a panther. He darted here and there—half-crouching as if for a spring—looking first at the bears in terror—then at his friends above with an appealing glance. Cornered at last by the beasts the agile warrior made a desperate leap and shot clear over them.

The outlaws on the wall cheered this feat, but their shout was followed by a low, half-indignant exclamation from the lips of the Indians.

"Shoot bears! shoot bears!" suddenly exclaimed a warrior, when he saw that the life of his friend was in deadly peril.

"No! no!" thundered Black Diablo; "drop down the end of a rope! drop down a rope! Leaping Deer can climb it!"

Quickly a rope was lowered into the pit. The Indian, hotly pursued by the bears, darted across the arena and seized it; but before he could begin the ascent the female bear seized him in a deadly hug, and her dripping fangs went tearing into the flesh and muscles of his bare shoulders.

A wild, agonized cry escaped the unfortunate warrior's lips, his head fell back, and his eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets.

Dumb Hercules had watched the contest between the bears and Leaping Deer closely, and the moment he saw the Indian seized he seemed to forget that he was his enemy; that his own life was in the balance, and springing forward, he dealt the bear a blow on the side of the head that sounded like the crack of a pistol.

Instantly the bear released its hold on the savage, her jaws fell apart, and blood gushed from her mouth. Her jaws had been broken by the lick, and in agony the beast rolled on the ground, clawing at her head and striking frantically at space.

Released from the mad brute's clutches by the timely aid of the scout, Leaping Deer was quickly drawn from the Bear Pit, his body bathed in blood.

A shout of joy burst from his friends' lips when he had been safely landed on the wall, and as the crowd made way for him to pass out, the young warrior turned and glanced back into the pit at Dumb Hercules with a look of anxiety and pity on his savage, pain-distorted face. Then he walked away, passed down the bank into the defile and disappeared into the darkness.

Enraged by the smell of blood, the male bear again turned upon Dumb Hercules. For some time the great silent yet active man eluded him by dodging from side to side.

The mob on the walls hooted and jeered, and ever and anon Black Diablo flung some brutal jest at the man who was fighting for his life. But Hercules appeared to hear them not. He kept his eyes upon the bear—his thoughts upon his danger.

Suddenly an arrow was shot from above into the rump of the bear. With a fierce snort and snarl it whirled and with its teeth withdrew the painful barb then charged the scout with renewed fury. The next moment they had grappled and a desperate struggle ensued. They fell to the earth and rolled over and over, but by some means or other Hercules tore himself from the grasp of the brute and regained his feet. His breast, now entirely stripped of clothing to the waist, was covered with blood. Blood was trickling from his beard. His breath was coming quick. His great breast throbbed. An unearthly light blazed in his eyes. The muscles of his powerful arms and chest stood out in great knots.

Black Diablo and his men clapped their hands and shouted.

Again the bear charged upon the giant, and rear-ing upon its haunches struck the man with its paw. Hercules staggered under the blow, but quickly recovering himself he seemed to summon all the power of his great frame into a last single effort, and struck the bear on the side of the neck, knocking it over and half-stunning it.

The spectators yelled like elated demons.

Dumb Hercules leaned against the lower cross-

wall as if for support. He lifted his eyes and ran them along the line of excited wretches on the wall until they rested upon the face of Black Diablo. The eyes of the two met, and for a moment seemed fixed.

Then the outlaw burst into a hoarse, defiant devilish laugh.

With his eyes still upon the villain, Dumb Hercules's face began to twitch, he lifted his hand and pointed his finger at the villain—his lips parted as if to speak. All the desperate passion of the human heart seemed rising within his breast seeking expression in words.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Black Diablo, "if you could only speak, you'd say something strong, wouldn't you, Paul Raymond?"

Dumb Hercules started and clutched at his throat. Those who had known him as being speechless, started with surprise when they heard a groan escape his lips, and then recoiled with terror when from his lips there burst in tones of thunder—screeching and withering as the lightning's blast, the words:

"Curses upon you! curses upon you!"

The burst of a thunderbolt would not have startled those outlaws and savages more violently.

In the moments of his awful agony God had given the desolate, persecuted man the power of speech to curse his tormentors, as He had given back to Samson of old his strength to destroy his enemies. And scarcely had the words fallen from his lips, when, bracing his shoulder against the wall, his face grew almost black: his frame heaved as if in the agonies of a terrible death; the wall of rock began to sway; there was heard a sound as if of grinding stones—then, with a thunderous crash, the wall fell outward, and Dumb Hercules, with a triumphant laugh, bounded out over the stones and away into the darkness of the defile.

CHAPTER XVI.

INDIAN GRATITUDE.

As the Silent Scout dashed away over the fallen wall his enemies for a moment stood dumb, silent, amazed.

The infuriated bear scrambled over the stones in pursuit of its giant foe.

The torches on the wall began to move; pistols began to ring out as random shots were fired down the pass; yells and shouts rose on the night as bear, outlaws and savages went trailing off down the defile in one mad chase.

Twenty wavering, flickering, sputtering torches were strung out along the pass, casting weird and Titan shadows on the side of the bluffs, and lighting up the faces of the pursuers with a ghastly glare.

Dumb Hercules made good use of his liberty, and like a deer sped down the dark defile.

The bear being no respecter of persons, and being closely pressed from behind by an Indian warrior, turned suddenly and seized the savage. A fierce struggle ensued, and the others coming up stopped, not knowing but that the giant had been overtaken. It was several moments before they had discovered their mistake and dispatched the bear, and resumed the chase.

But this diversion had enabled the fugitive to put several rods of space between him and the foe. He soon passed by the outlaws' den, and as he did so he imagined he saw a lithe form glide out from the mouth of the cavern into the pass ahead of him. The way was exceedingly dark, and as he advanced it grew darker as the defile grew narrower, so that he had to slacken his footsteps and move with more caution—feel his way, as it were, and that, too, with the belief that an enemy was in ahead of him.

Suddenly he became aware that the pursuers were gaining upon him. The light of the foremost torch faintly pierced the gloom around him. He could see the dim outlines of his own shadow gliding before him, and finally he discovered that he was right in that there was some one ahead. He could see the outlines of the form about a rod away, and as the light behind came closer, he saw it was the form of an Indian. He was not a little puzzled by this movement of the savage, but satisfied that it meant him no good he stopped short, stooped and picked up a stone, determined to dispatch the fellow. But before he could raise the missile the savage turned and running rapidly backward, threw up his hands and hurriedly exclaimed:

"M—Leaping Deer—me friend of pale-face—Silent Scout hit bear—save Leaping Deer's life."

The light of the torch which was not over three rods behind, fell upon the red-skin's face, and, true enough, Dumb Hercules saw that it was the face of the young Indian he had saved from the clutches of the bear.

Was that act of mercy already bearing him fruit? Was the warrior—out of the gratitude of his savage heart—seeking to repay him for saving his life?

As these thoughts flashed through the giant's mind, intuition seemed to answer in the affirmative, and dropping the stone he dashed on with renewed speed and soon was running side by side with the Indian.

In silence they proceeded together for several minutes. Ever and anon the Indian glanced back over his shoulder, and finally he announced:

"We gain on light—turn here—quick!"

He took the giant's arm and gently turned him into a narrow defile on the right where the darkness was intense; but the way seemed familiar to Leaping Deer, and taking the giant by the hand he led him, as a child leads a blind man, back into the dark labyrinths of the hills.

They saw the lights of the pursuers no more, and soon they were beyond sound of their excited voices. Then Leaping Deer stopped and again said:

"Pale-face save Leaping Deer's life—Black Diablo no shoot bears—let Leaping Deer die first—pale-face

kill heap many Sioux—he brave warrior—Leaping Deer no coward—he kill many pale-faces—but he friend of Silent Scout—Silent Scout save his life—Black Diablo want kill scout—Leaping Deer no like Black Diablo—he no shoot bear to save Leaping Deer's life—Leaping Deer save Silent Scout—take him to hidin'-place—bring him gun—knife—meat—let him go to friends."

Having thus again expressed himself the Indian moved on, followed by Dumb Hercules, who made no response. They threaded the dark and winding defile for an hour, then clattered over a rough and rugged ridge and descended into another defile beyond.

The Silent Scout placed implicit confidence in his red guide. He asked no questions, but patiently followed on. It seemed to him they would never reach the objective place of safety, but feeling satisfied that the Indian meant to make no mistake in his work of gratitude he allowed him to have his way without protest.

Finally they turned to the right and entered a narrow rift in the bluffs where the darkness was so intense that the Indian was again compelled to lead the scout. In this way they had proceeded several rods when the guide turned toward the bluff on the right where grew a fringe of scrubby.

On their hands and knees they crawled through the thicket, and had nearly reached the base of the almost perpendicular bluff, when a voice suddenly exclaimed:

"Halt there!"

The two stopped and held their breath in silence.

"Who comes there?" was again demanded.

Hercules recognized the voice, and in a low, measured tone—in that voice given him as though born of agony in the Bear Pit, he replied:

"I am Dumb Hercules."

The Indian himself started violently at the sound of the man's voice, for he had not heard him speak at the Bear Pit.

"Liar!" was the response that came from the lips of the challenger, "Dumb Hercules cannot speak. You are an outlaw," and the last word was accompanied by the click of a revolver.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING IN THE GLEN.

"Hold on there, Skylark Sam," said Dumb Hercules, as the click of the revolvers greeted his ears, "I am Dumb Hercules, though no longer speechless and will prove it to you."

"Then advance, and be awful sure you're not tryin' to deceive as old a rat as Skylark Sam," was the response of the Border Detective, for he the challenger was.

"I have a friend with me, Sam—an Indian friend, whose safety I also be peak," replied the scout.

"Well, both o' you waltz this way and remember I've a pair of revolvers ready for you."

The giant and the Indian rose to their feet and stepped out into the open space where the detective stood.

"By the River Jordan!" exclaimed Old Skylark, "you are big enough for Hercules, I'll swear; but walk on around into the glen and be examined—for ward, march!"

The guard conducted the giant and his friend around the point of the bluff and into a little glen-like place where, within the glow of a camp fire were seated a score of men and two females, whom the scout recognized as Dare Devil Dick and his rangers, Colonel Owens and friends, and Inez Bienville and Kitty Lane.

At sight of Hercules and the Indian—their half-nude forms covered with blood and bearing the marks of violence—a cry of surprise and horror burst from the lips of the startled party.

"My God! it's Dumb Hercules," cried Colonel Owens, starting toward the Silent Scout.

"Yes, what's left of me," calmly replied the giant.

"Heavens! he speaks!" shrieked the colonel, starting back in amazement—as though the giant had risen from the tomb.

"Oh, my dear, dear uncle!" cried Inez, as she ran with extended arms toward the scout, "at last you have regained your voice!"

"Yes, my dear girl," replied the great man, "the voice that left me in sorrow and grief came back to me in the passions of agony."

"By goodness!" exclaimed the colonel, "I never heard of such a thing before; but, Hercules, you and that Indian look as though you'd been in the clutches of a grizzly."

"Worse than that, colonel; I have been in the power of Black Diablo, and he threw me into a den of bears. My red friend here fell into the pit accidentally and got hugged and clawed before I could rescue him. To tell you the truth, my friends, I have passed through a perfect hell of torture since we parted. But I'll tell you of that hereafter."

"Yes, yes," said the colonel, "you must have those wounds dressed at once. Here, Skylark, you attend to that red-skin, and I'll fix up our big friend."

So saying, the colonel and detective proceeded to their work, and in a few minutes the two wounded men were cared for as well as the means at hand would permit.

After this was done Old Skylark Sam said:

"Now if we only had your gal, colonel, we'd be ready to return to the plains."

"She is still in the power of the savages, then," observed Hercules.

"Yes, but we have decided upon a plan by which we shall attempt her rescue when the proper time comes. It will be dangerous, but then we are gittin' used to dangers, and kind o' like them."

Presently the Indian turned to Dumb Hercules and said:

"Me go now—good-by."

The scout took his hand and with no little feeling said:

"Good-by, Leaping Deer; may the Great Spirit be your friend. I shall never forget you. If you see Black Diablo tell him Dumb Hercules lives, and will yet be even with him. But, Leaping Deer, I have another favor to ask of you."

"Leaping Deer good Ingin—Silent Scout save his life—do anything for Silent Scout," replied the Indian.

"Then promise me you will not tell your friends where we are concealed."

"Ugh! Leaping Deer no do that—Black Diablo find you then—me no like Black Diablo—he no kill bear—Leaping Deer's tongue silent—but pale-face must not stay here long—Sioux warriors' eyes sharp—find many easy—good-by, pale-face."

"Good-by—God bless you!" replied the scout, as he watched the form of the only white Indian he had ever met disappear in the shadows.

"I tell you," said Colonel Owens, "we may regret allowing that Indian to leave. He can bring the whole of Sitting Bull's band down upon us if he choose. Treachery, they say, is inherent in a savage."

"I am not afraid of his betraying us," said Hercules. "True, an Indian is considered treacherous, but at the same time some of them have honor. The way that Indian and I became friends was under peculiar circumstances, and now that I have time and speech I'll tell you of my adventures after parting with you," and then the scout went on and narrated the story of his capture by Black Diablo, his struggle in the Bear Pit, the sudden recovery of his voice, his escape and meeting with Leaping Deer, who had conducted him to that place.

"A narrow escape," said Skylark Sam; "and we may have a bit more fightin' afore we git out o' this region: but boys, the time is approachin' for us to move toward the Ingin village, if we attempt Miss Zulima's rescue to-night."

"What are your plaus, Sam?" asked Hercules.

"Well, in the fu'st place, I made a reconnaissance of the Ingin village, and carefully noted its surroundings. It is situated in an oblong park or valley, and surrounded by towering bluffs. It can be approached from north or south on horse-back through narrow valleys. In the west side, within thirty or forty feet of a perpendicular wall of rock, perhaps fifty feet high, and runnin' half the length of the valley, is situated the lodge of Sitting Bull. Hard by, but a little nearer to the rocky palisades, are the lodges of his squaws and daughter, the princess, Laughing Eyes. And near these again is the prison-lodge, into which we saw Zulima led as a captive. Now we propose to make an attack on the upper end of the village where the red-skins' ponies are kept at grass, and stampede them, if possible, and while the attention of the savages is drawn off in that direction, I propose to leap from the top of that cliff in my parachute near the chief's lodge, and then if I can liberate Zulima and get her to the foot of the cliff without too much risk, I'll do so. A rope with a noose is to be lowered by two strong men, the noose placed around the gal's waist and she drawn up into liberty. If I can't git her, I will git Sitting Bull himself, if I can, or the princess, Laughin' Eyes, and clap the noose around him or her and have him or her drawn up into captivity and held in hostage for the safe delivery of Zulima. Of course, we've got to have the rope long enough so that if I fail in getting Zulima, I can carry it out from the foot of the wall and lasso the chief or his gal, while those on the cliff still hold to t'other end. We've already got six strong lariats, aggregatin' nighly two hundred feet, tied together and ready for the work."

"If you can't get Zulima," said Dumb Hercules, "by all means get the princess, for she will be more to the chief than all the rest."

"That's the way we figgered it, Herc," replied Sam.

"But how are you to get out?" asked the scout.

"If I can get Zulima away and up the palisades without being seen, the rope'll be lowered for me. If I'm detected on the jump I'll have to run for it and take my chances. If I get the chief or the gal, I'll deliberately buck right up to the savages and give them to understand that I'm there for business—to neegotiat' an exchange o' prisoners."

"It will be a desperate undertaking," said Hercules.

"Yes, I know, Herc, but then we are desperate men," replied Sam.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DESPERATE WORK.

It was past midnight. The moon had gone down and darkness and silence reigned throughout the great hills.

The Indian village lay wrapped in slumber. The evening camp-fires had long since died out.

But suddenly, in the midst of the solemn hush of the voiceless night, the report of a gun rung out, awakening the slumbering echoes, and startling the savages from their sleep. This report was immediately followed by a savage yell, then came crashing volleys of firearms, mingled with the shouts of an attacking foe.

In a moment the whole Indian village was aroused. The wildest confusion reigned, and seizing their weapons the excited warriors went hurrying away in the direction of the conflict.

While the attention of the whole camp was drawn away toward the southern end of the village, a form unseen leaped from the summit of the palisades

overlooking the lodges of Sitting Bull and his family, and descended noiselessly to the earth.

It was Skylark Sam, who with his ingenious parachute had gained admittance to the village where the approach of a foe was least expected by the wary savage.

Peering around him in the dark, the Border Detective made sure no savage was near. He could hear female voices in the lodge before him, but could see no one.

As he stood by the great rock something fell on the ground at his feet. He knew what it was—the end of a rope lowered from above. Picking it up he arranged the noose on the end and then advanced stealthily toward the lodges, the rope paying out from above as he moved along.

Coming to the group of lodges, he stopped and listened. The darkness was quite intense, yet so accustomed had he become through force of habit to working in the darkness—so acute was his hearing—that he was enabled to see and hear quite distinctly where others would have been blind and deaf. He heard the squaws in the lodges jabbering away in wild excitement to each other, while the din of battle raged furiously down the valley.

Gliding to the rear of the lodge into which he had seen Zulima taken that day, Skylark cut a slit in the side, and placing his mouth to the aperture, called out in a loud whisper:

"Zulima!"

There was no answer, but he heard a movement in the lodge.

"Zulima Owens!" he repeated.

"Who speaks my name?" came a low, sad voice from within.

"Me, Zulima—Skylark Sam—don't scream—are you bound?"

"No; but this lodge is fastened all around."

"Then you're alone?"

"Yes."

"Come this way," said the Border Detective, cutting the slit in the prison-lodge larger.

The next moment Zulima stepped out into the night, where the wild din of battle came to her ears more distinctly.

"Be quiet and nervy now, Zulima, and you will be rescued," said the detective, placing the noose around her body; "friends are on the top of that cliff and they'll draw you up with this rope. Don't scream when you go swingin' up into the air, or all will be lost. Do you understand, little one?"

"Yes, sir," she faintly replied.

Old Skylark gave the rope a jerk. Instantly it was drawn taut by those on the cliff. Taking Zulima by the arm, the two walked rapidly to the foot of the palisades.

The next instant the girl felt herself lifted from her feet.

"Tell the boys I'll send up the princess, if I can catch her," whispered the detective, as Zulima swung clear of the ground.

The next moment Skylark Sam stood alone, listening in breathless suspense.

Two minutes went by and the rope fell at his feet again. So far success had crowned his efforts, and Zulima was rescued; and so quickly and easily had it all been done that, instead of ascending himself, as had been previously arranged, he picked up the rope and again advanced toward the lodges. As he approached them he saw a figure come out of one and go into another—that from which Zulima had just been taken.

"Ha!" exclaimed the daring man to himself; "that is my bird now, the princess Laughing-Eyes!"

He glided quickly to the door of the lodge, and there stopped and opened wide the noose on the rope and held it up.

A moment later the princess came hurrying from the lodge and ran plump against the detective.

In an instant her slender form was encircled by the noose, when a scream that would have done credit to a panther escaped her lips.

Instantly the rope was drawn taut, and lifting the girl in his arms Skylark ran with her to the foot of the palisade, and the next instant she was rising upward along the face of the cliff, while scream after scream issued from her lips.

Coolly Skylark Sam turned and walked to the lodge of Sitting Bull and sat down by the entrance.

The cries of the princess soon became hushed. His friends had performed their part speedily and skillfully.

The sound of the battle was receding in the distance.

Soon he would have a nest of hornets down and about him.

The cries of the princess were repeated by others of the royal family in prolonged and lusty tones that brought the chief himself hurrying to the family lodges, to learn of the mysterious disappearance of Laughing Eyes and the captive girl. Not one of his family had the remotest idea of how the maidens had been spirited away.

"I can tell you where your darter is, Sitting Bull," said Old Sam, emerging from the shadow of a ledge and confronting the chief.

With a cry the great chief started back amazed at the boldness of the intruder.

"What pale-face dares enter the village of Sitting Bull?" the Indian asked in a peremptory tone.

"Skylark Sam," was the response.

"He shall die like the sneaking wolf," declared the chief.

"Go slow now, Sittin' Bull: understand that if you kill me, your daughter will be forever lost to you!"

"Where did the pale face come from?"

"From the clouds, and up into the clouds has your daughter and the white captive been taken."

"And why does the sky-traveler stay here?"

"To talk with you—to tell you that no harm shall

come to your child if you call in your warriors from the hills that are in search of the scalps of the pale-face, and protect me from the violence of your friends and the followers of Black Diablo."

By this time a dozen warriors had arrived upon the scene and were crowding around the chief and the white intruder. Sitting Bull waved them back.

"The pale-face asks much," the chief replied to the detective.

"I only ask for protection for myself while in your village."

"Sitting Bull has but two eyes. He cannot watch all his warriors who are mad for scalps of the pale-faces who attacked our village, slew many of our braves, and then fled."

"Chief, let me tell you again, if I die in your camp, your daughter will die in the camp of my friends. Her life depends upon mine. Call in your warriors and have them remain here. I will stay in your camp until morning comes, and then you and a few of your warriors can go with me and I will take you to your child. The sky-traveler is no coward or he would not have come here."

The chief became moody and thoughtful. He loved his child with all the instinct of his savage heart. He could not fully convince himself that she had been spirited away, and so set scores of warriors to searching the valley. But an hour's searching removed all doubts from his mind.

Meanwhile the news of the scout's presence in the village had spread like wildfire, and hundreds of warriors had gathered around the chief's lodges, excited, vindictive and revengeful. It was all the chief could do to prevent them laying violent hands on the intruder, and, as if afraid the detective would be tomahawked in the darkness, he conducted him into his tent. There the two sat down and continued their council, while outside a circle of savages a score deep surrounded the lodge. Skylark Sam could plainly hear their shuffling feet, and the murmur of their voices like the distant surge of a rising storm.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE EXCHANGE—A TRUNKLESS HEAD.

THROUGH a mountain pass in the early morning dawn a little cavalcade was moving at a brisk walk. At the head of this party rode Dare Devil Dick, the Boy Ranger, for it was his band, accompanied by Colonel Owens and John Lane, Inez, Zulima and Kitty, and Dumb Hercules, still refusing to ride, with the princess Laughing Eyes a captive, that was making its way eastward through the great hills.

The party had begun their retreat from the hills in the night, and when the sun rose they were many miles from the little glen where we last saw them.

Old Skylark Sam had not returned, nor was he expected for a day or two, should he succeed in carrying out his plaus, which had already resulted in Zulima's rescue and Laughing Eyes's capture, but should he fail in the part yet to be accomplished—to hold in check the forces of Sitting Bull until all were safely out of the hills—it would be at the cost of his own life and perhaps that of all his friends. To effect a safe retreat the princess had been captured, and it was by working upon the chief's great love for his child by threats of her death, unless his warriors were held back, that the shrewd old Border Detective had hoped to gain his point.

All the detective's plans were known to his friends, and, while there would be little to fear should they work successfully, Dare Devil Dick and Dumb Hercules observed the same precautions, as though liable to be attacked at any moment.

The morning hours, however, wore away and they heard or saw nothing of outlaw or savage. At noon they halted for an hour to let their hard-pressed horses rest and graze, and appease their own hunger.

Then they moved on until night, when they encamped on the Belle Fourche. Guards were stationed at all points and every precaution taken to prevent a surprise. But nothing disturbed the peace of the camp that night, and by daylight next morning all were in the saddle and on the move.

Laura Eyes was treated with all the kindness possible. Zulima was her companion, as she had been Zulima's. The assurance that she would be returned to her friends soon set at rest all her fears, and from her apparent indifference one would have naturally concluded she was a willing captive.

With a feeling of the greatest relief, the party finally debouched into the open plain, and when they halted at noon the hills and their lurking shadows and dangers were miles behind.

About the middle of the afternoon of that day, a party of horsemen was discovered coming in the distance behind them.

"That's Skylark Sam and the chief, I'll venture to assert," said Colonel Owens.

"There appears to be a dozen of them," said John Lane.

"About that. I should say," added Dare Devil Dick; "but, friends, let us move on to yonder chaparral and prepare for a fight should it prove to be a party desiring to meet us that way."

To this all agreed, and soon the party had dismounted in the chaparral and was prepared for the worst. But by this time the pursuers had come so close that all were enabled to recognize Skylark Sam among the foremost of the party.

Colonel Owens and Dare Devil Dick left the grove and advanced about forty rods into the open plain and stopped.

The Indians then drew rein and after a few moments' council Sitting Bull and a warrior dismounted, and, with Skylark Sam still on the horse, ad-

vanced to meet the two whites, leaving his band behind on their ponies, ready for instant action.

"Good evenin', boys," said the redoubtable Skylark Sam, as the three came up; "glad to see ye—Colonel Owens and Dare Devil Dick, this gentleman is the great Sioux chief, Sitting Bull."

The colonel and the ranger received the chief kindly, when they at once entered into conversation about the exchange of prisoners, as Skylark Sam had proposed in the chief's own lodge.

"Yes, friends," said the detective, with a bland, unctuous smile, "I made the proposition to exchange Laughing Eyes for myself. I know it war an unheard-of proceedin'—a prisoner negotiatin' his own exchange, but I felt sure you'd be willin'."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," replied Colonel Owens, unable to repress a smile; "Dick, will you go up and escort the princess down here?"

"Yes, sir," and Dick departed.

In a few minutes the little princess, with a happy, smiling face, came bounding across the prairie and was received by her father in eminent joy.

Skylark Sam now dismounted and the princess was assisted to the back of the pony, and after the exchange of a few more words the chief turned toward his friends, and the three whites hastened to the chaparral, where Old Sam was received with ringing shouts.

"Well, Sam, your plans worked well," said Dumb Hercules, after the excitement of the old detective's reception had subsided.

"Like a charm Herc; I couldn't 'a' asked anything better. I found the old chief a little gruff and caustic-like at first, but he soon mellowed down and became as tractable and gullible as a common Ingin. He accepted every proposition I made him, even though he war in his own stronghold. To be sure I said and told him many things I couldn't swear to, but the end, you see, justified the means. When we started out from the village it was with about fifty warriors, but I insisted on him sending most o' them back, and back they went."

"But do you think they staid back, Sam?" asked Dick; "do you know that there are not fifty or a hundred red-skins back a ways waiting only for the exchange to pounce upon us?"

"I do not; and, as I war goin' to say, we don't want to take things easy, for while I war workin' the chief so nicely, he might have been throwin' dust in my eyes."

"But what of Black Diablo?"

"Don't know, more'n the chief's a bit wrathful at the outlaw. He says he is responsible for all the late troubles down on the Cheyenne, and thinks he is a bad man. I think there'll be a rupture there soon, 'less Diablo gits out into a healthier climate. But, friends, time's precious, now, so let us improve every moment and be movin'."

In a few minutes the party were in their saddles and on the move, and late that night they reached the Hidden Home of Dumb Hercules, where they had left Old Ruth in charge of the wounded rangers.

The rangers encamped on the bluff, to guard against surprise, while Hercules' Colonel Owens, John Lane, Skylark Sam, Dare Devil Dick and the three maidens repaired to the secret chambers in the hills to spend the night.

Old Ruth and Inez prepared supper for all, and after the meal had been dispatched, and when seated tog' ther in conversation, Colonel Owens turned to Hercules and said:

"I presume, Hercules, you will now give up your secluded life and go with us, won't you?"

"No, not yet, colonel," replied the giant, something of the old-time look coming back into his face, "my work is not quite accomplished yet."

"Ay! I have thought all along that the shadow of some dark secret hung over your heart, Hercules," said Owens, "and I am convinced of it, now."

"Yes, colonel, you're right," said the giant, "and I will tell you what it is, and then I know you will not blame me for being the deadly avenger that I am. Years ago, Louis Bienville, the father of Inez, and I set out into the great West to make for us a name and a fortune. We were both young men, full of life, hope and joy. We had grown to manhood together. Our tastes, aspirations and views were the same. Our lives seemed cast in the same mold.

"We first settled in Southern Colorado, and found employment on the great stock-ranch of Juan Elgasco. Senor Elgasco was a Spaniard—a man of noble birth—a kind-hearted and generous man. He had two daughters, Inez and Zoe, with whom my friend and I fell in love, and, with the consent of their father, I married Inez, and Louis married Zoe.

"At the time, however, Louis knew not that he had a rival in one Tomas Carriza, a black-hearted ranchero belonging to another ranch. But soon after the marriage he learned that Carriza's advances to Zoe had been spurned by both her and her father. The villain sent Senor Elgasco a letter in which he swore vengeance upon his entire family, and before he could be arrested he fled to the mountains, gathered about him a band of the worst characters that ever cursed God's earth, and from that time until this he has been known as Black Diablo. He began his work of vengeance by stealing Elgasco's stock and running them off into the Indian country, by burning our range and shooting our men. This state of affairs continued for five years, when Elgasco himself was shot down one day in cold blood by the outlaw and his men. A few days later another of the family was slain, and to Louis and I it looked as though all were doomed to fall by the hand of that villain who had boldly defied the powers to capture him."

"So after talking the matter over we concluded to take our families and leave the country. We came to Northern Nebraska and located—starting a cattle-ranch. We lived happily with our families free from

the curse that had made life so uncertain in our old home, and we prospered, too. For eight years we lived there in seclusion. In the mean time two children had come to bless my home, a boy and girl. Three had been born in Louis's family, but two had died—Inez, the eldest, a girl then of thirteen, being the only one left. She was named after my wife. I called my boy Louis—my little girl Mary, after my mother. And what a manly, fair and noble little fellow Louis was—and, Mary—three years old the day she was killed—"

Here the great man broke down, and bowing his head gave way to emotions of silent sorrow. Presently he started up and in a firm voice continued:

"As I said we had lived there eight years when one day while I was away, Black Diablo and his band of cut-throats who had at last been driven from out the South, and had got wind of our whereabouts, swept down upon our homes and butchered all our families, except Inez, who, with Ruth, was absent from the house. Louis, being at home at the time, was killed in the midst of his family. But his wife, when I arrived there, was not dead. She lived long enough to tell me that Black Diablo and his band, aided by a score of savages, had done the bloody work.

"Friends, when I stood by the side of my dead wife and babies my grief was so great that I could not speak—my vocal organs became paralyzed, and, from that day until the night I stood in the Bear Pits in the mountains—face to face with the demon Carriza—I never uttered one syllable, and that is why and how I became Dumb Hercules! But I registered a vow over my dead wife and children to have revenge on Black Diablo, and although three years and over have passed since the massacre, I have been unable to kill that demon, while many of his followers have fallen at the sound of my bow-string.

"Old Ruth and Inez preferred to remain with me, and to make them secure, I conceived the idea of this Hidden Home, upon which I have spent weeks and months of labor—more than was at all necessary, but I had to be doing something."

"And now you know why I cannot leave here yet—Black Diablo lives!"

"Yes, curse him!" exclaimed Dare Devil Dick, "but I hope—"

His words were here interrupted by one of the rangers coming hastily into the room and saying:

"Hercules, you are wanted on the bluff. That Indian, Leaping Deer, arrived there just now and wants to see you."

Wondering what the Indian could possibly want, the giant arose and hurried from the cavern to the top of the bluff, followed by his male friends.

True enough, there in the moonlight by the side of his pony stood the young Indian, Leaping Deer, his face wearing a grim, stoical look of triumph. At his feet lay a bundle wrapped in a blanket.

"Why, Leaping Deer, I am surprised to see you here," said Hercules. "What does it mean?"

"Me show Silent Scout," replied the Indian, and stooping he caught hold of the edge of the blanket at his feet and jerked it upward, when a dark, spherical object rolled out upon the ground.

"My God!" exclaimed Colonel Owens, "it's a human head!"

"Yes," said Hercules, as he gazed into the face staring up into the sky with glassy eyes, "it is the head of Black Diablo!"

"Yes—me catch him alone," said the Indian with a grin, "me shoot him—cut off heap scalp below chin—whole head—bad man—no kill bear—rather kill Leaping Deer—but that not all why me kill him—ugh!" and the savage spurned the head with his foot, as though a sudden thought had aroused within him a new feeling of revenge.

"Well, why did you kill him, Leaping Deer?" asked Hercules.

"Me love pretty Ingin girl, Singing Bird—Black Diablo come take her away—make her his squaw—she die—waugh! he kill her!" and again he kicked the trunkless head viciously.

"But why did you bring the villain's head here?"

"Show Silent Scout, who save Leaping Deer's life, so he rejoice too—Black Diablo kill Leaping Deer's Singing Bird—kill Silent Scout's squaw and papoose."

"How did you know that, Leaping Deer?" asked the giant.

"Me hear Black Diablo tell Ingins one day—make big talk—then laugh—but me fix him—ugh!" and for the third time the head received a kick from the irate young avenger.

"Well, really, Leaping Deer, you have saved me from perhaps much danger and work—the work of slaying that demon. You are a brave and noble Indian, and I wish I could bestow upon you an inheritance of eternal happiness, but I can only wish you well and thank you for your labor in my behalf."

"Ingin," put in Skylark Sam, "there's a reward for the head of Black Diablo, hot or cold, and if you want to leave the dinged mug with me, I'll present you with this Winchester rifle and this revolver."

A smile of delight overspread the face of the Indian, who grasped the gun and pistol, saying:

"Me take 'em heap quick!"

In spite of themselves, the rangers could not suppress an outburst of laughter at the Indian's laconic reply.

Hercules asked the red-skin to go down to his retreat and get some food, but the fellow declined, and mounting his pony he bid the giant good-by and rode away toward the west.

"Well, my friends," said Hercules, "I think now I shall go on with you. My work is done. Black Diablo is dead, and I now feel like bearing my own name again, Paul Raymond."

"Paul Raymond," repeated Colonel Owens, taking the giant's hand, "Paul Raymond, as your past life

has been dark and sad, I hope and pray that the future may be bright and joyous; and remember, it shall ever be my pleasure to contribute to that end."

"Thank you, colonel, thank you."

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

A YEAR has passed since the events of the preceding chapter and from the valley of the Cheyenne we take the reader to that of the Niobrara, wherein is located the prosperous colony of Owelburg.

Without encountering further dangers from the Indians and outlaws, the colonists had reached their destination and began life anew in the great and fertile valley.

Colonel Owens is living in the full enjoyment of an active life, bending every energy—sparing no means or time to accomplish the cherished object of having done something for mankind and his country while living that would be remembered when he was gone. His daughter Zulima—his idol—his all, is the pride and pet of the colony, and it is no secret that she is the affianced wife of Dare Devil Dick, or Richard Clayton, as is his true name; and all are looking anxiously forward to the day when the gallant young ranger shall claim the prize that upon more than one occasion he risked his own life to save.

Paul Raymond took up his residence in the colony and is engaged in stock-raising, Inez Bienville being his partner in business.

Through Old Skylark Sam, Inez had learned of the death of a rich relative in Spain who had left to her grandfather quite a snug little sum of money; and as her grandfather was dead it so happened that she was the sole heir, and without delay or trouble procured her inheritance, which she turned over to her uncle, Paul Raymond, for investment. Her mother's friends were all dead so far as she knew, and her father's relatives were strangers. Yet with her little fortune she could have gone to them and perhaps lived happily and in luxury and ease. But remembering how great was her father's love for Paul Raymond—their inseparable friendship, and the kindness of the great-hearted man to her in the days and months and years of her bereavement, when he himself was weighed down with sorrow and affliction, she could not—she would not think of leaving him; and so with her old servant Ruth staid and kept house for him and shared her fortune with him—doing everything, in fact, in her power to lighten his burden of sorrow.

Some might have thought that she had other reasons for remaining at the colony, for a friendship had sprung up between her and handsome Tom Woolson that the more observing and thoughtful could see was gradually ripening into love. But be this as it may, time a one would tell.

Skylark Sam visits Owen's colony quite frequently. He is still a Border Detective, and strongly adheres to the idea that the balloon will yet be so perfected that the upper air can be navigated with ease and safety. On this subject many regard him as visionary, and, indeed, "cranky," and perhaps it is his greatest weakness; but when it comes to working up a case against outlaws and criminals in which perseverance, shrewdness, tact and courage are required, there are few border detectives the peer of the eccentric Skylark Sam.

"Little Curley," the girl spy and daughter of the outlaw, Mark Tahlt, was sent by Colonel Owens to an aunt of hers in the East, and the last time he heard from her—and she writes him often—she was leading a quiet, honorable life.

Dumb Hercules bequeathed his "dugout" or "Hidden Home" to Dare Devil Dick and his followers, but the rangers never stopped there, for its existence being known to the red-skins made it more of a death-trap than a place of safety.

THE END.

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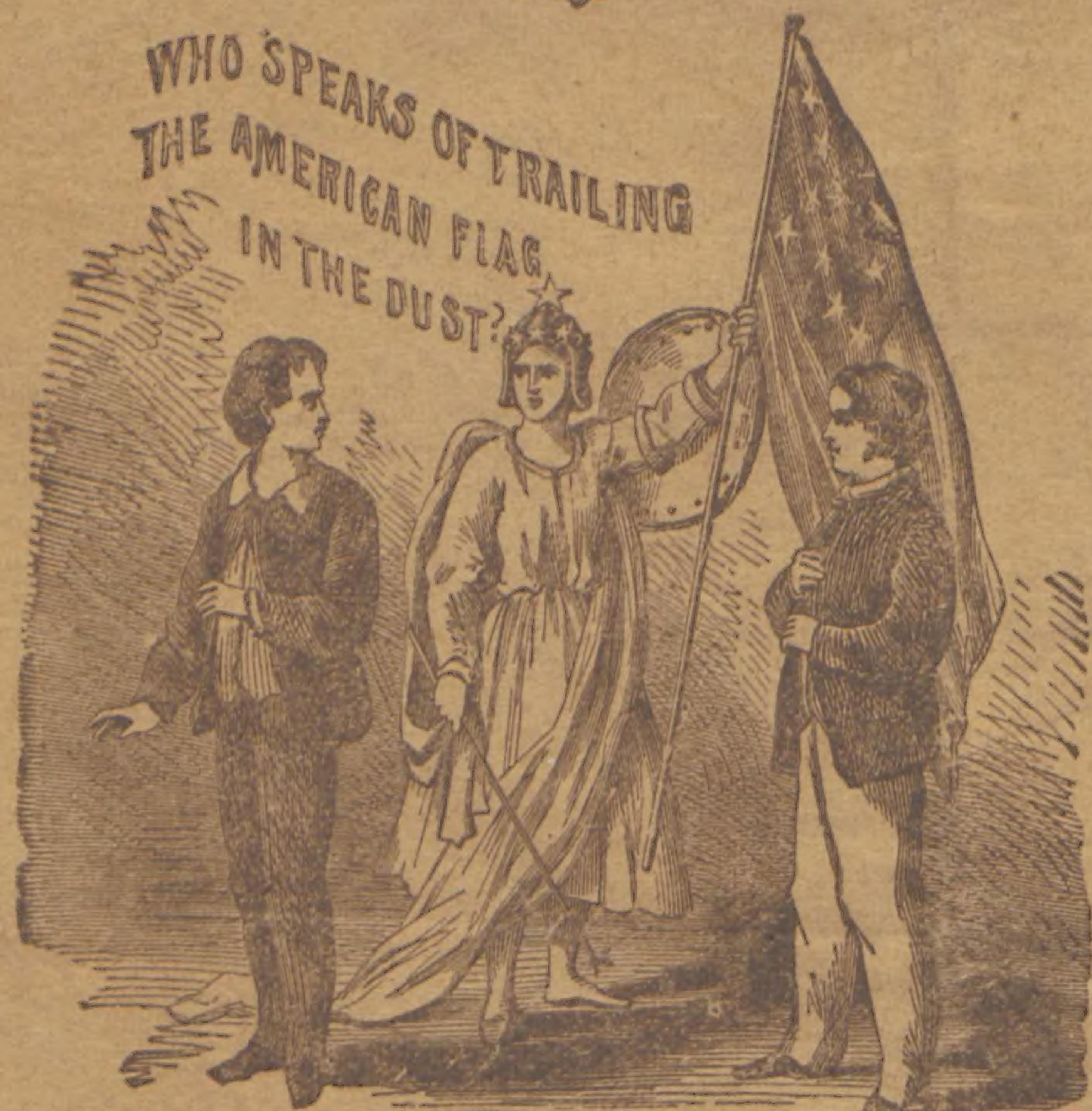
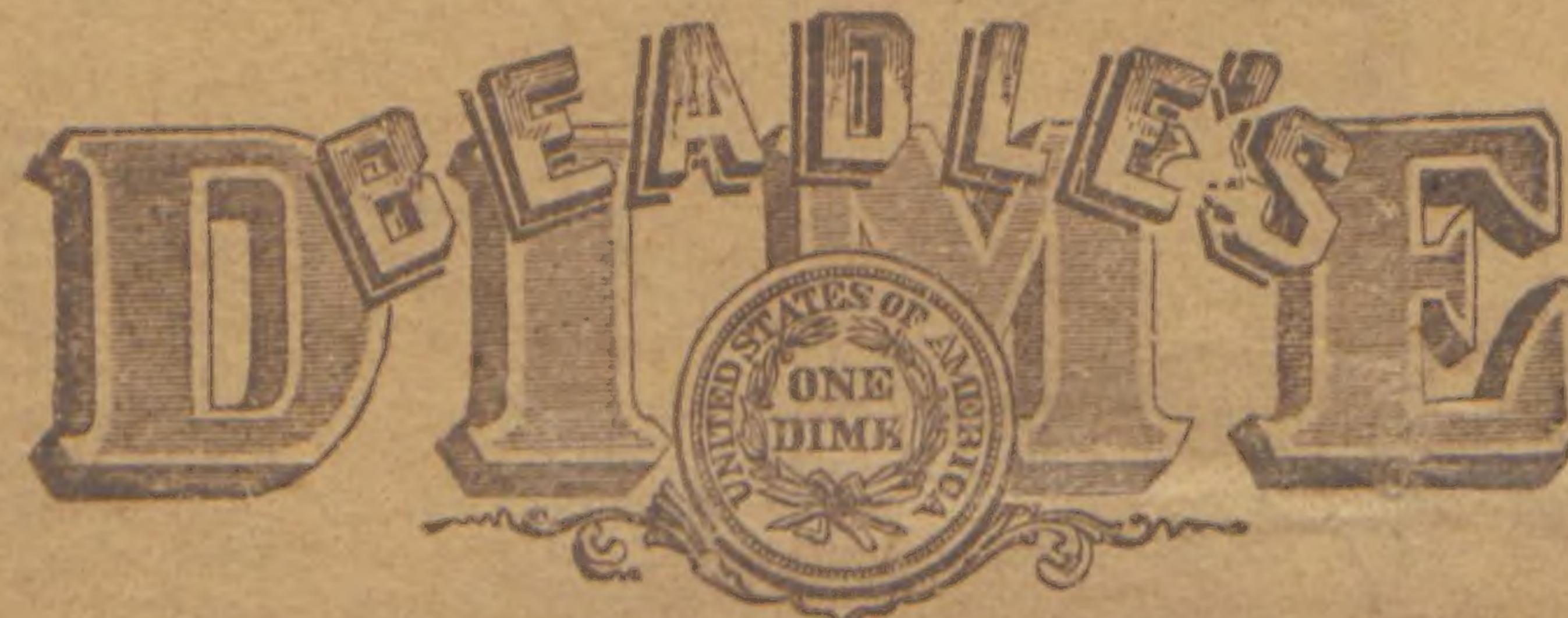
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